



Ending the Two-Tier Marriage System Requiring All Religious Marriages in the UK to be Registered Under British Law

Executive Summary

This policy requires **all religious marriages in the United Kingdom to be registered under British civil law**. By ending the two-tier marriage system, women and children will no longer be trapped in religious-only unions that deny them legal protections in divorce, inheritance, and custody. This policy also ensures that **only legally registered marriages confer access to state benefits**, tax privileges, or inheritance rights. Religious-only marriages without civil registration will no longer be recognised for public funds or property transfers.

This policy mandates that **all divorces in the United Kingdom must be obtained through civil proceedings**. Religious divorces will no longer be tolerated as substitutes, as they leave individuals—particularly women—without enforceable rights in property, custody, and inheritance. By consolidating divorce into one legal channel, this measure protects vulnerable individuals from coercion and restores legal clarity.

Background & Rationale

Thousands of women in minority communities are married only in religious ceremonies without legal registration. These women discover too late that their marriages carry no civil protection: they have no claim to spousal support, property, or inheritance. This system perpetuates inequality and allows unscrupulous men to abandon wives and children with impunity. The current law enables exploitation by sustaining parallel systems of marriage. To safeguard women's rights, all marriages must be registered under civil law. The current system allows couples in unregistered religious marriages to claim spousal benefits, tax breaks, or inheritance rights through loopholes, despite lacking legal status. This undermines fairness, rewards non-compliance, and leaves women particularly vulnerable in disputes. Restricting state benefits and inheritance rights to registered marriages ensures equal treatment and discourages exploitation.



The persistence of religious divorces without a corresponding civil process has created widespread injustice. Many women in minority communities believe they are divorced after a sharia ruling, yet remain legally married under British law. This traps them in legal limbo: unable to remarry, unable to assert property rights, and unable to secure custody arrangements in civil courts. The current system sustains a two-tier legal structure, in which women suffer unequal treatment and diminished protection. Civil divorce ensures that all parties are afforded equal rights under the law, regardless of cultural or religious background.

Read our Report “[The Sharia Question](#)”

Policy Proposal

- Mandate that every religious marriage must be registered with the civil registry to be valid.
- Prohibit religious institutions from solemnising marriages without proof of civil registration.
- Establish penalties for religious bodies that perform unregistered marriages.
- Launch a nationwide campaign to inform communities of the new requirements.
- Legislate that only civilly registered marriages qualify for welfare benefits, tax exemptions, or inheritance rights.
- Amend welfare, tax, and inheritance laws to require proof of legal marriage registration.
- Prohibit automatic rights of inheritance or capital gains exemptions for unregistered marriages.
- Provide pathways for couples to register their marriages retroactively.
- Legislate that only a civil divorce will have legal standing in the United Kingdom.
- Religious bodies will be prohibited from issuing divorce certificates.
- Family courts will have exclusive authority over the division of property, spousal support, and child custody.



Implementation & Enforcement

- Amend the Marriage Act to require civil registration as a precondition for validity.
- Direct the General Register Office to coordinate with faith institutions, ensuring compliance.
- Offer a transitional grace period for couples in unregistered marriages to register retroactively.
- Provide legal aid and community outreach to support vulnerable women.
- HMRC and DWP will update systems to require proof of registration for spousal claims.
- Amend the Inheritance Act to deny intestacy succession to unregistered partners.
- Public campaigns will inform communities that unregistered marriages confer no financial rights.
- Transitional provisions will allow couples time to regularise their marriages.
- Amend family law to require civil divorce for all legal purposes.
- Create statutory penalties for religious institutions issuing divorces without requiring civil confirmation.
- Fund legal clinics and outreach services to assist women trapped in religious divorces without civil recognition.
- Run public information campaigns in multiple languages, clarifying that civil divorce is mandatory for complete legal protection.

Anticipated Impact

- Equal protection for all women in marriage and divorce.
- Elimination of legal ambiguity around marital status.
- Reduction in the exploitation of women through religious-only unions.
- Greater integration of minority communities into British civic life.



- Stronger incentives to register marriages legally.
- Fair distribution of public funds and tax benefits.
- Protection for women through legal recognition of their marriages.
- Reduction in exploitation through unregistered unions.
- Uniformity in divorce law, ending the confusion caused by religious rulings.
- Stronger protection for women's property and custodial rights.
- Reduced coercion within religious communities.
- Decline in the number of women trapped in "limping marriages," divorced religiously but still legally married.

Conclusion

The two-tier marriage system is discriminatory and unsustainable. Requiring all religious marriages to be registered under civil law is a necessary step to protect women, ensure fairness, and reinforce equality before the law. State benefits and inheritance rights must be tied to civil registration, not religious ceremony. This measure reinforces fairness, safeguards women, and prevents abuse of public funds.

Civil divorce as the sole legally binding mechanism is essential for protecting vulnerable individuals and upholding the principle of equality before the law. Religious divorces must never again substitute or undermine the protections guaranteed by civil law.