

# Arbitration Bill on religious tribunals and sharia 'courts' clears House of Lords

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Legislation to tackle gender inequality and discrimination promoted by religious tribunals like sharia 'courts' has cleared the House of Lords.

Baroness Cox's bill on sharia councils and religious tribunals has cleared its third reading and is now heading for the Commons, if an MP can be found to sponsor the legislation. At present no MP has offered to take up the Bill and attempt to steer it through the Commons. The Government have previously said that the Bill is not the right approach, and are instead conducting an independent review of sharia 'courts'.

The Bill has received support from peers across the political spectrum and campaign groups, including the National Secular Society, Muslim Women's Advisory Council and Passion for Freedom.

It passed its third reading without any amendments.

The Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill seeks to ensure that equality legislation is applicable to all arbitration and mediation services. It would prevent anyone involved in arbitration doing "anything that constitutes discrimination, harassment or victimisation on grounds of sex."

This prohibition would extend to "treating the evidence of a man as worth more than the evidence of a woman" or "proceeding on the assumption that a woman has fewer property rights than a man".

It also seeks to help women trapped in legally unrecognised religious marriages and would instruct public bodies to inform individuals of the "need to obtain an officially recognised marriage in order to have legal protection".

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