

BBC stands by Panorama exposé of Sharia Councils

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The BBC has rejected a complaint from the Islamic Sharia Council in Leyton East London after it was featured in the *Panorama* programme about the treatment of women in sharia arbitration bodies. *Panorama* had accused the Council of ruling on cases that it had no legal authority over – such as child custody.

A member of staff at the Islamic council was secretly filmed telling a woman complaining of domestic violence to only go to the police as a "last resort".

Marriages conducted under Sharia law are not recognised under UK law and are often obtained by couples in addition to civil marriages.

The [Panorama investigation](#) featured evidence from a number of women who claimed to have had great difficulty in securing Sharia divorces from their husbands despite being granted civil divorces.

It was alleged that some women who use Sharia councils are unaware that such bodies have no legal rights to impose conditions on custody.

To investigate the claims, the BBC sent an undercover reporter to the council to ask for advice. The reporter claimed that her husband regularly hit her.

She was encouraged to bring her husband to the Sharia Council for a meeting to discuss their marriage and told she should only go to police as a "last resort".

After the programme was broadcast, a spokesman for Leyton Sharia Council said the secret recording was "underhand" and that conversations had been edited out of context.

He added: "It seems that *Panorama* had a pre-determined agenda and stereotype of how sharia councils operate, and they ensured that a round peg was forced to fit the square hole of this agenda. The council takes a harsh stance on domestic violence. Women who cite domestic abuse in their applications for divorce are advised strongly to report it to the police."

The council said the woman who took part in the secret filming had only come to the site on the pretext of wanting advice and that she told staff she did "not want to get her husband in trouble".

In response to a complaint from the Leyton Sharia Council, the BBC said it stood by the *Panorama* exposé of Sharia Councils, including the secret filming.

Nazir Afzal, the CPS chief crown prosecutor for the North West, who specialises in such cases, told the programme: "What I have just witnessed is so dangerous. If there is early intervention we know that people's lives can be saved, they can be spared significant harm".

In a statement to the local *Guardian* newspaper, a BBC spokesperson said: "*Panorama* fully stands behind its investigation into the workings of some of Britain's Sharia Councils. The programme was raised in a Westminster debate in Parliament the next day in which a government minister referred

to the concerns we had raised. Senior British Muslims such as Baroness Warsi also called some of the councils' secretly recorded comments 'disgraceful'.

"As Nazir Afzal, said in the film: 'Most of them are absolutely fine but there are some ...who are putting women at risk.'"

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