

Press Release

24 November 2020

No embargo

Women's rights organisations call on Peers to resist dangerous and unfettered powers contained in Covert Human Intelligence Bill

The Centre for Women's Justice, End Violence Against Women, the Faith and VAWG Coalition, FiLiA, the Latin American Women's Rights Service, Rights of Women, Standing Together and Women's Aid have released a briefing urging peers to resist the dangerous and unfettered powers outlined in this Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill, which will be debated in the House of Lords today.

The Bill creates law to allow covert human intelligence agents to commit crimes with impunity, with no limitation on the severity of the crime and with all approvals granted internally. Furthermore, it restricts victim survivors of these offences from seeking redress in the criminal or civil courts.

While the Government has cited the Human Rights Act 1998 as protecting us from the abuses that could so easily result for the sweeping powers under this Bill, women's rights organisations – along with human rights organisations across the sector – point out the Government's own dangerous assertion that the Human Rights Act does not apply to crimes committed by its covert agents

The organisations have called for:

- Limits to the offences which can be authorised under the Bill;
- The introduction of a robust oversight scheme;
- Retained routes of redress for victim survivors, through criminal and civil justice processes.

Hannah Couchman, Senior Legal Officer at Rights of Women said today:

"This Bill represents an unacceptable threat to our human rights – a threat that is keenly felt by women, who have historically been subject to abuse at the hands of the police and security services under the guise of 'intelligence gathering'. It is unconscionable for such powers – powers to commit the most appalling crimes imaginable – to be introduced with no limits and no system of independent judicial oversight, while restricting access to justice for victim survivors. Rigorous safeguards are essential if this Bill is to avoid perpetuating the cycle of violence against women and girls."

Nicki Norman, Acting Chief Executive of Women's Aid Federation England, said:

"A day before we mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, we are severely concerned that this proposed law provides the security services and the police with a lawful basis to commit crimes including rape, sexual violence and torture."

Women have bravely spoken out about their appalling experiences of rape, or intimate relationships which were built on deception, during undercover policing operations in recent years. We urge Members of the House of Lords to limit the offences that are permitted during covert operations, and ensure that the state never sanctions violence against women."

Harriet Wistrich, Founding Director of the Centre for Women's Justice, said:

"It is extraordinary that this Bill is being rushed through parliament without consultation at a time when the undercover policing inquiry to examine and report on past undercover policing which led to gross violations of human rights including sexual violations without consent which have caused lasting psychological damage. We need to learn from past failures not permit future misconduct of the most serious kind."

Gisela Vale, Director of the Latin American Women's Rights Service, said:

"BME migrant women are already one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society, with little protection of their fundamental human rights and even less access to justice. They are also members of already over surveilled and over policed communities and this Bill would put them at higher risk of further harm and abuse. Essential amendments need to be included in this Bill to ensure they are afforded basic protections and access to justice."

Notes for Editors

1. For further information please contact Hannah Couchman, Senior Legal Officer at Rights of Women: hannah@row.org.uk or Estelle de Boulay, Director of Rights of Women: 07828241281
2. The briefing released by the women's rights organisations can be found at https://rightsofwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Joint-Briefing-on-the-Covert-Human-Intelligence-Sources-Criminal-Conduct-Bill_Nov-2020.pdf
3. Bill documents can be found at <https://services.parliament.uk/bills/2019-21/coverhumanintelligencesourcescriminalconduct.html>