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UK rises tomorrow to bill threatening freedoms



Sources: The Leap [Photo: Vigil for Everard at Clapham Common (Ben Terrett)]

The rape and murder of Sarah Everard at the hands of a policeman and the proposed PCSC Bill, which will give greater power to law enforcement, sparked a wave of protests in the British country in 2021.

On the night of March 3, 2021, Sarah Everard was strolling through the streets of London. Returning from Clapham Common to her home in Brixton, Metropolitan Police officer Wayne Couzens detained her on the false pretext of breaching Covid-19 restrictions. The

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police officer drove her to Dover, where he raped and strangled the 33-year-old, burned her body and disposed of her remains in a nearby pond.

A week later, on 9 March, the officer was arrested in Kent on suspicion of the abduction and subsequent murder. The next day, Sarah Everard's remains were discovered in a forest near Kent. Wayne Couzens was charged with his kidnapping and murder, a crime the officer himself confessed to a few months later.

On the night of 13 March, vigils were held in various areas of the UK to honour the memory of Sarah Everard. It was the vigil at Clapham Common, near the area where she was abducted, that sparked a [stream of social protests](#) across the country. During the emotional event, police detained four people under the pretext of breaching pandemic-related measures. At the time, it was not yet known that members of the Conservative Party, including [Boris Johnson](#), had evaded restrictions on parties held on May 15 and [20, 2020](#). These events took place during one of the worst months of the pandemic in terms of the [death rate](#) in the UNITED Kingdom.

Although at the time it was unknown that several political representatives of the country had broken the law, the excessive use of police force during the vigil by Sarah Everard was considered an outrage to the victim of gender violence. It was too explicit an action to be ignored. In fact, a parliamentary inquiry by [the All Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy and the Constitution](#) noted that "fundamental rights" had been violated during the vigil by Sarah Everard. The document, entitled *Police Power and the Right to Peaceful Protest*, mentions the "multiple mistakes" made by the Metropolitan Police and Avon and Somerset police during vigils held in London and Bristol, respectively. This research was published on July 1, 2021. Three months earlier, a current of social unrest had been unleashed that spread throughout the country.

Pocos días después del asesinato de Sarah Everard y la actuación policial durante la vigilia del 13 de marzo, la Cámara de los Comunes aprobó por una amplia mayoría de 359 votos contra 263 el Proyecto de ley [PCSC](#) (Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts), que pasó así a su siguiente fase.

PCSC: el uso de la fuerza policial y el cese de las manifestaciones

El Proyecto de ley PCSC ha sido duramente criticado porque otorga un mayor poder a las fuerzas policiales para reprimir manifestaciones. Por ejemplo, podría significar que la policía fijase las horas de inicio y finalización de las protestas, o que las disolviese en el caso de que impidiesen el acceso a instituciones gubernamentales, como el Parlamento Británico. Además, reserva a los agentes el derecho de multar con una cantidad de 2.500 libras a los manifestantes.

Respecto a la posible implantación de la PCSC, el conocido abogado [Chris Daw QC](#) afirma que, si se llegase a aprobar, “supondría la mayor ampliación de poderes policiales para imponer restricciones a las manifestaciones que hayamos visto nunca”. De manera similar, [Jules Carey](#), jefe del bufete de abogados de acciones contra la policía y el Estado de la empresa Bindmans, apuntó que este proyecto de ley “representa una violación a los derechos humanos y constituye un ataque brutal contra el derecho a manifestarse de manera pacífica”. En otras palabras, sería una ley elaborada para socavar la legitimidad de los movimientos sociales.

Mientras este proyecto de ley estaba siendo debatido el 15 de marzo de 2021 en el Parlamento Británico, a escasos metros de allí, en Parliament Square, centenares de personas protestaban contra la violencia de género, y consecuentemente, contra el proyecto de ley que estaba siendo discutido en el interior de la institución británica. Durante el mes de marzo, también hubo manifestaciones multitudinarias en ciudades como [Bristol](#), Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Brighton, Birmingham, Bournemouth o Newcastle. Las protestas denunciaron la violencia hacia las mujeres y el uso desmedido de la fuerza policial.

‘Kill the Bill’: manifestaciones multitudinarias en 2021

El pasado 1 de mayo, tuvo lugar la movilización más importante en Londres contra el Proyecto de ley PCSC, en la que [miles de personas](#) salieron a protestar. Bajo el slogan ‘Kill the Bill’, se criticó el aumento de poder que se quiere otorgar a las fuerzas del orden para restringir protestas, que puede significar una imposición de restricciones a la libertad de expresión y al derecho de reunión.

Aunque la legislación no ha sido aprobada, los efectos están envolviendo diferentes esferas de la sociedad. Zehrah Hasan, director de [Black Protest Legal Support](#) denunció que dos observadores jurídicos [fueron detenidos](#) durante la manifestación 'Kill the Bill' del 3 de abril de 2021.

It was precisely during that demonstration that [Jeremy Corbyn](#) urged to "defend the right to protest". Speaking in [Parliament Square](#) and before the stony gazes of the suffragette Millicent Fawcett, Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela, the former leader of the Labour Party appealed to these historical figures who defended human rights and dedicated part of their lives to fighting for the increase of democratic freedoms.

The confluences between social movements and police repressions had already reached different social movements, as happened during the Black Lives Matter protests. Hasan himself lamented comments by UK Home Secretary of State Prity Patel, who called the June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in this country "[terrifying](#)." It was the Minister of the Interior herself who proposed the creation of the 'Nationality and Borders Bill', a legislation that aims to diminish the rights of [refugees](#) and that caused a wave of protests on October 20, 2021.

Gender-based violence in the UK

In the few days that separated Everard's murder and the celebration of International Women's Day, protests rejecting gender-based violence were amplified in various social strata. In the British Parliament, Labour Party MP [Jess Phillips](#) denounced the attack on women and read the name of [all gender-based violence fatalities](#) in the UK since International Women's Day 2020. He also noted that, from the murder of Sarah Everard on March 3 to March 10, "six women and a girl had been killed at the hands of men." The discourse of a person involved in political institutions was fundamental to give greater relevance to the problem of gender violence. As journalist [Lesley Riddoch](#) points out in a criticism of the media, it was Phillips' words in the House of Commons, coupled with the recent murder of Sarah Everard, that prompted greater media reception. Because Sarah Everard was not the only woman killed by gender violence, not even in that [week](#) that began on March 3, in which Geetika Goyal, Imogen Bohajczuk and Wenjing Lin also lost their lives at the hands of men.

There is no doubt that this is an endemic problem at a global level. In the particular case of the United Kingdom, during 2021 there were [138 murders](#) of women at the hands of men. In the Twitter account [@CountDeadWomen](#) it is pointed out that this meant an increase of 21 victims compared to 2020. This shows that, as Jess Philips said, femicide in the UK is "not anecdotal and forces women to live in fear".

The terror of going for a walk at night was reflected in social networks after the murder of Sarah Everard. During those days, many women began to share their fears of sexist attacks through WhatsApp groups, Zoom sessions or Twitter. The tragedy sparked fundamental feminist solidarity movements, and sparked a broad debate about the role of the police in British society and the security situation for women in the UK.

At this juncture, different women's rights groups have consistently demanded to know why only 1.5% of recorded rapes and 3.6% of all sexual offences are brought to trial in England and Wales. They also demanded solutions to curb the increase in cases of domestic violence since the beginning of the pandemic.

Moreover, the [document #194andcounting](#), published on March 14, 2021, noted that, since the 70s, at least 194 women have died at the hands of the police or because of the prison system of England and Wales, either in state custody or in prison.

Despite numerous gender-based violence killings, including that of Professor [Sabina Nessa](#), which also reached great repercussions in the United Kingdom, the country's leaders do not seem willing to implement new measures to stop this current of violence. In fact, [Boris Johnson](#) has refused to categorize misogyny within hate crimes. Her argument is that there are already mechanisms to combat violence against women, noting that the problem lies in the fact that "there is extensive legislation that is not carried out correctly."

The immobilization of some political leaders contrasts with the broad movements that took place last year in favor of gender equality. On [January 15](#), a series of demonstrations will take place under the slogan 'Kill the Bill', as a denunciation against the advance of legislation that threatens to rescind freedoms in the United Kingdom.

PCSC and the battle for cultural and political hegemony

The PCSC Bill was passed in the House of Commons of the British Parliament and the final verdict is now expected in the House of Lords, which will take place on [17 January](#). If it becomes law, the punishment for obstructing public spaces would increase from six months to 51 weeks — more than a year — and law enforcement would reserve the right to stop and investigate a person for simply believing they were related to some illegal action, without even having the slightest proof of it.

This impediment to demonstrating is another example of the political and ideological battle existing in the United Kingdom and the fierceness with which certain Conservative movements are trying to stop the advance of freedoms. Apart from the 'Kill the Bill' protests and movements for gender equality, recent years in the UK have witnessed numerous social mobilisations. In 2021, demonstrations against climate change had their great apogee globally during COP26. In those weeks of November, a massive protest originated in which more than [100,000 people](#) gathered in Glasgow and more than 300 demonstrations were held globally.

In addition, 2020 marked the emergence of Black Lives Matter mobilizations in the United States, after the murder of George Floyd, and this wave of discontent expanded globally. In the United Kingdom, protests in London and Bristol stood out, where a group of protesters threw the statue of slaveholder [Edward Colston into](#) the harbor. Precisely, this symbolic action clearly showed the existing cultural battle with respect to the legacy of the British Empire. It is enough to read the debates between historians, current affairs analysts, journalists or different members of Parliament in the United Kingdom to understand how the line that delimits the legacy of the old and the new, historical memory and the aspiration to increase rights, has marked its ideological and cultural strength in the colonial past of the British nation. And to delve deeper into this paradigm, just a few days ago the four [Black Lives Matter](#) protesters who helped tear down the statue of Edward Colston during the June 2020 social protests were acquitted of all charges.

Faced with this verdict, Conservative Party MP Robert Jenrick warned of the danger of "accepting vandalism and criminal harm as forms of political protest". On the other side of the ideological spectrum, activist and writer Akala, who published a few years ago the

book *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*, in which he details his experience as a descendant of the [Windrush Generation](#) in a British society deeply hostile to people of different cultures, explained that "the propaganda of British values represents a distortion of history."

Analyzing this confluence of opinions and social movements, the PCSC Bill emerges as an attempt to stop the increase in protests for the rights of different groups. Aside from extensive police powers over the management of demonstrations, such as the ability to impose conditions on any protest deemed disruptive to the community, you can be punished with up to ten years in prison for damaging memorials, including statues. This is particularly representative of contemporary society, in which singling out figures from the past who left a slave legacy is one of the cultural battles that are having a hugely relevant impact in the UK.

On December 8, and on the occasion of the third passage of the PCSC Bill, there were demonstrations in London, Cambridge, Birmingham and Bristol. Now, January 15 arrives, a day in which multiple movements will be held throughout the country against the advance of this legislation. Precisely on the day that, in 1919, [Rosa Luxemburg](#), one of the staunchest defenders of human freedoms of the twentieth century, was murdered. As she said, "whoever does not move, does not feel the chains." The Polish Marxist founder of the Spartacist League came to say that protests are fundamental to changing society. Meanwhile, the UK is rocking dangerously between that dichotomy between authoritarianism and freedom. On the one hand, immobile stone statues embodying a slave past. And, in the meantime, social movements to prevent democratic loss, achieve an open debate on the colonial legacy and continue marching against gender violence, xenophobia and climate change.

Source: <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/reino-unido/kill-the-bill-reino-unido-se-levanta-proyecto-ley-amenaza-libertades>

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