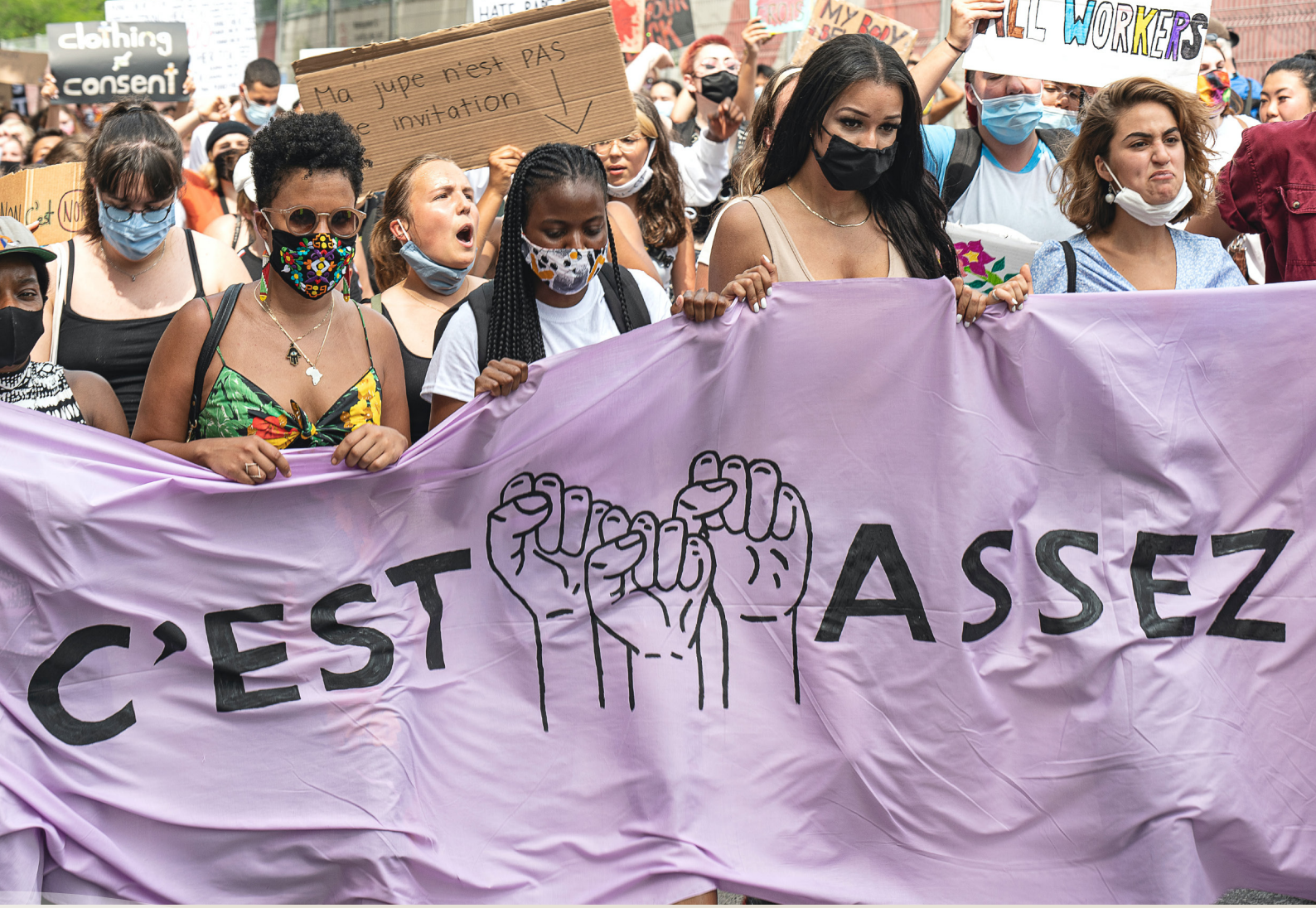

AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

CAMPAIGN TO STOP KILLER ROBOTS

WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR PEACE & FREEDOM

OCTOBER 2020
AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS AND PATRIARCHY
1st edition
20 pp.

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Published by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom with support from the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

Cover photo: Demonstration against sexual assault, 19 July 2020, Montréal, Canada © Mélodie Descoubes / Unsplash

The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.

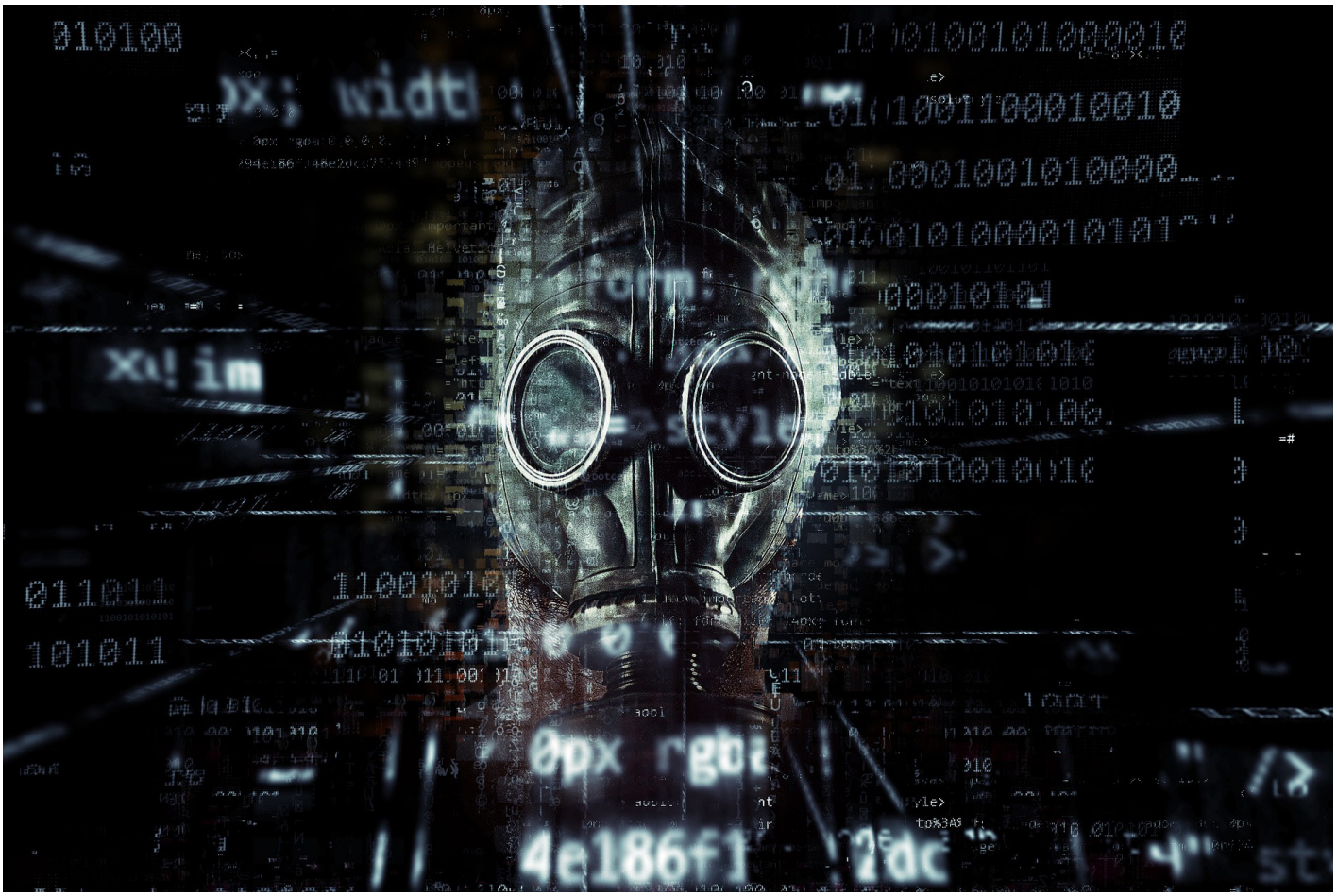
Hannah Arendt

Introduction

Given the patriarchal world we currently live in, autonomous weapon systems will exacerbate discriminatory gender norms and be used to commit acts of gender-based violence (GBV).

The culture of violent masculinities, which surrounds the development, possession, and use of weapons and technologies of surveillance and control, will inevitably be embedded within autonomous weapons and the policies and practices of their use. This will exacerbate challenges for preventing violence, protecting civilians, and ending gender essentialisms or discrimination. It will also facilitate intersectional discrimination and harm on the basis of race, sexuality, disability, religion, and other identities and experiences.

This paper describes GBV and how it relates to the militarised masculinities and mission of the patriarchy described in an earlier paper.[1] It looks at the connections between the possession and use of weapons and the commission of acts of GBV, unpacking in particular arguments about autonomous weapons and sexual violence. Looking at the challenges that autonomous weapons will pose to accountability for violence, among other things, the paper also explores the relationship between these weapons and the broader culture of impunity inherent in gendered violence.



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What is gender-based violence?

Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence that is directed at a person because of their sex and/or because of socially constructed gender roles[2]—that is, because of sexual orientation, gender identity, or non-conforming behaviour or presentation of sex and gender. The normative roles and understandings associated with sex, gender, and sexuality also interact with other factors, such as age, class, and race. The term GBV recognises that violence takes place as a result of unequal power relations and discrimination in society.

GBV exists in and is widespread in all countries and all societies. It is a human rights violation and, when carried out during armed conflict, is a violation of international humanitarian law and can constitute a crime against humanity or war crime. Acts of GBV can include sexual violence, such as sexual harassment, rape, forced prostitution, sex trafficking and sexual slavery, and harmful customary or traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages, and honour crimes; physical violence, such as murder, assault, domestic violence, human trafficking and slavery, forced sterilisation, and forced abortion; emotional and psychological violence, such as abuse, humiliation, and confinement; and socioeconomic violence, such as discrimination and/or denial of opportunities and services, and prevention of the exercise and enjoyment of civil, social, economic, cultural, and political rights.

The International Committee of the Red Cross explains that while these forms of violence can be perpetrated against any individual, they constitute GBV because they have differential gendered impacts. For example, forms of sexual violence are perpetrated differently against a person depending on their sex; the health consequences of sexual violence differ based on sex; causes of sexual violence differ based on sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity; and the societal impact and stigmatisation of sexual violence differs depending on these factors, too.[3]

Men and boys constitute the majority of victims of violent death worldwide. According to the United Nations, half a million people die from armed conflict or armed violence every year. About 84 per cent of these are male and less than 16 per cent are female.[4] Men and boys are subject to GBV—including forced recruitment, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, or mass killing on the basis of sex.[5] But women, girls, and LGBTQ+ people are the primary targets for GBV.

The UN Office for Drugs and Crime estimates that 87,000 women were intentionally killed in 2017. About 58 per cent were killed by intimate partners or other family members.[6] "Non-intimate" GBV, including murder, sexual abuse, and sexual torture, is disproportionately targeted against women and girls.[7] LGBTQ+ people also face extraordinary levels of physical and sexual violence. In November 2018, the Trans Murder Monitoring research project noted 369 murders of trans and gender-diverse people over the past year in the United States.[8] The US National Center for Transgender Equality notes that "more than one in four trans people has faced a bias-driven assault, and rates are higher for trans women and trans people of color."[9]

GBV as a manifestation of militarised masculinities

As explored in the paper *Autonomous weapons and patriarchy*, patriarchy produces a hierarchy among sexes and among hegemonic norms of gender identities and expressions. Patriarchy celebrates a "particular idealized image of masculinity in relation to which images of femininity and other masculinities are marginalized and subordinated."[10] The culture of militarism plays an outsized role in determining what this masculinity looks like, through which primacy is awarded to "toughness, skilled use of violence, presumption of an enemy, male camaraderie, submerging one's emotions, and discipline (being disciplined and demanding it of others)."[11]

Military institutions engage actively in the processes of differentiating and "othering" that reinforces the ideal of gendered hierarchies. Turning men (and others) into warfighters requires breaking down their sense of ethics and morals and building up a violent masculinity that is lacking in empathy and glorifies strength as violence and physical domination over others portrayed as weaker. Hierarchy is fundamental to military training. Teaching human beings to kill other human beings "requires dehumanizing others by promoting the belief that another human is somehow a 'lesser' creature," Cynthia Enloe explains. "One of the central forms of dehumanization promoted by military training and the culture of daily life in the military has been the supposed inferiority of women—that women are less than men."[12]

A culture of sexual violence—and impunity for perpetrators—is part of the military's purposeful development of violent masculinities. One immediate consequence of this culture is that women in the military are often subject to sexual assault. In 2012, an estimated 26,000 US military personnel were sexually assaulted by their colleagues. Women, at the time making up 15 percent of US active-duty forces, were disproportionately attacked. The 2013 documentary film *The Invisible War* revealed that a woman soldier in a combat zone is more likely to be raped by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire.[13] Cynthia Enloe connects this violence by male soldiers toward women inside the military to "the masculinized idea that women are property to be used by men in ways that allegedly confirm their own manhood and simultaneously preserve the masculinized atmosphere in certain institutional spaces."[14]

This also applies to the treatment of LGBTQ+ servicemembers. Participants in a study of queer soldiers in the US military reported experiencing discrimination, threats and intimidation, vandalism, sexual harassment, and physical assault, including sexual assault. This was the case even after the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"—the policy that barred asking military personnel whether they were LGBTQ+, but prohibited "openly gay" personnel.[15]

Weapons and GBV

The culture of violence inherent to the norms of militarised masculinities has implications for weapons culture and possession. Weapons—from small arms to nuclear bombs—are seen from this perspective as being essential to power. Whether the concern is having the biggest stockpile or the most high-tech capabilities, weapon possession and proliferation is treated as indicative of status: of being ready to "defend," of being able to oppress and control.[16]

"Weapons are consistently used as a symbol of power, authority, and their persistent availability contributes to escalating conflicts," writes Annie Matundu-Mbambi.[17] Much of this is gendered. Guns, for example, are often used to suppress participation and intimidate people, particularly women, from participating in conflict resolution, elections, governance, and post-conflict reconstruction processes. Similarly, gun violence is used against LGBTQ+ people to "terrorize not only those immediately and physically impacted, but the entire community."[18]

All weapons are part of this culture of gendered violence, and all weapons can be used to commit acts of GBV—including autonomous weapons. Arguably, both the culture and commission of GBV are *inherent* to this technology.

Culture of sexual violence and impunity

We can start with the culture of sexual violence embedded in weapons themselves. From the explicitly sexual descriptions of nuclear weapons[19] to the use of small arms to facilitate rape,[20] weapons can perpetuate a culture of sexual violence and patriarchal domination, an act of sexual assault, and/or the culture of impunity for perpetrators.

Even weapons that one may not consider having a relationship to sexual violence can be implicated. Weapons such as battle tanks and armoured vehicles can be used to block roads or surround a village in order force women or men to be cornered or trapped and subsequently raped, killed, or abducted. Warships can be used for trafficking women and girls or to block a harbour for the same purposes as using a tank or armoured vehicle for blocking roads.[21]

Armed drones could be used to the same ends. Already, they exude the culture of sexual violence and impunity. According to a former Joint Strike Operating Command (JSOC) drone operator interviewed by *The Intercept*, one nickname given to armed drones is "Sky Raper".[22] A nickname like this is about violent masculinities dominating and directing the conduct of soldiers—invulnerable warriors, immune from prosecution for rape and war crimes—on and off the battlefield. It reinforces the institutionalisation of rape as a tool of war. It helps the operators and developers of the weapon own the use of rape for domination and to defeat a target, while simultaneously participating in the normalisation of rape.[23]

This kind of nickname is an overt sexualisation of the nature of imperial violence: those operating weapons from far away deploy them unlawfully in other countries, penetrating their

borders without their governments' consent. The "Sky Raper" represents the "white Western phallic power" enforcing power and masculinity over "the other".[24]

The imagery of rape and nonconsensual activities in this context is not an aberration. A culture of sexual violence—and subsequent immunity—is part of the culture of dominance and invulnerability that is part of the military's purposeful development of violent masculinities and a "warrior ethos".[25]

Autonomous weapons and sexual violence

This is part of why the argument that one of the advantages of autonomous weapons is that they "won't rape" is so preposterous.[26] Such an assertion relies on an assumption that rape in warfare is something born of emotion, something that happens "in the heat of the moment". But time and again, sexual violence in conflict is ordered by states and by armed groups alike. Rape and other forms of sexual- and gender-based violence have been a part of war throughout history and continue to be so during all of today's conflicts, to the point where it has been officially recognised as a weapon of war.[27]

There is also no technical barrier to an autonomous weapon being used to commit an act of sexual violence. A machine that can be programmed to manoeuvre inside of urban areas and engage in combat with humans can also be programmed to inflict sexual violence against them. As Charli Carpenter notes, "If I can imagine a machine inflicting lethal violence on a human being through projectile, I have no problem whatsoever imagining a machine forcibly penetrating" a human body.[28]

Further, unlike a human solider, an autonomous weapon, if programmed to rape, would not hesitate to do so. The arguments about "emotion" in human soldiers work both ways—if we recognise that human soldiers have the capacity to rape out of "revenge" or anger, we can also recognise that they have the capacity to refuse an order to commit sexual assault. This is a capacity that an autonomous weapon would not have.

It's also important to note that the risk of sexual and gender-based violence is also heightened during and after conflict. War destabilises communities and exacerbates already existing gender inequalities and oppression of women, girls, LGBTQ+ people, and others who do not conform to societies' standards of gender norms. Thus, in considering the charge that "robots won't rape," we also need to consider not just the machine itself committing such an act, but the ways in which autonomous weapon systems may lower the threshold for the use of force, leading more and more communities into situations where sexual and gender-based violence is likely to increase throughout society at large.

Signature strikes and GBV

It is also essential to recognise that sexual violence is not the only act of gender-based violence possible with autonomous weapons. Targeting certain people for execution or detainment on the basis of sex, for example, is another way in which these weapon systems could be used to facilitate or commit GBV.

As explained in *Autonomous weapons and patriarchy*, autonomous weapon systems will likely rely on "target profiles"—categorisations of human beings based on physical

characteristics that are written into algorithms and detected by the machine's sensors.[29] We already have the example of "signature strikes," used by armed drone operators, to inform our understandings of how autonomous weapons might function.[30]

Lack of transparency around armed drone operations makes it difficult to know what standards are used to determine how individuals come to constitute a legal target in the eyes of armed drone users. However, there are some indications that the United States uses maleness as a signifier of militancy. According to a *New York Times* report from May 2012, in counting casualties from armed drone strikes, the US government reportedly records "all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants … unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent."[31]

As the report *Sex and drone strikes* points out, while there is no clear policy that the United States necessarily designates all military-age males as fighters, this does not mean sex is not used as one component of a "signature". This extends also to who the US government counts as a civilian in terms of "bystanders" or "collateral damage" of a drone strike. If others killed along with the target are also men of a military age, they may be counted as "combatants" based on that signifier alone, reducing the statics of civilian casualties in official recording processes.[32]

Photo Twisted gun outside of UN Headquarters © WILPF

The practice, if not the policy, of signature strikes can thus constitute GBV. While these strikes are not necessarily targeting individuals solely because they are men of a certain age, those executing the strikes appear to be using sex as a signifier of identity for the purpose of assessing whether or not a subject is targeted, and/or whether a strike is allowed (i.e. taking into account the sex of others in the vicinity of the strike), and/or to determine the impact of a strike subsequently. The sex of the subject is not the motivation for the attack, but it is being used as one proxy for another identity—militant—which in turn provides the motivation. If people are targeted, or considered to be militants when proximate to other targets, on the basis of their sex, then this constitutes a form of GBV.[33]

Warning about the precedent set by signature strikes and the use of armed drones, the authors of *Sex and drone strikes* note that accepting systems within which human beings can be identified as militants on the basis of their sex, whether before or after attacks, sets a dangerous precedent for such associations in the future. "Such broad and morally unsustainable associations are incompatible with a requirement to ensure that individual uses of force or individual attacks are under meaningful human control." Instead, "they promote a future in which human control is limited to authorizing the application of mechanized bureaucratic processes, and individuals are killed without another human being knowing the reason for which the action took place."[34]

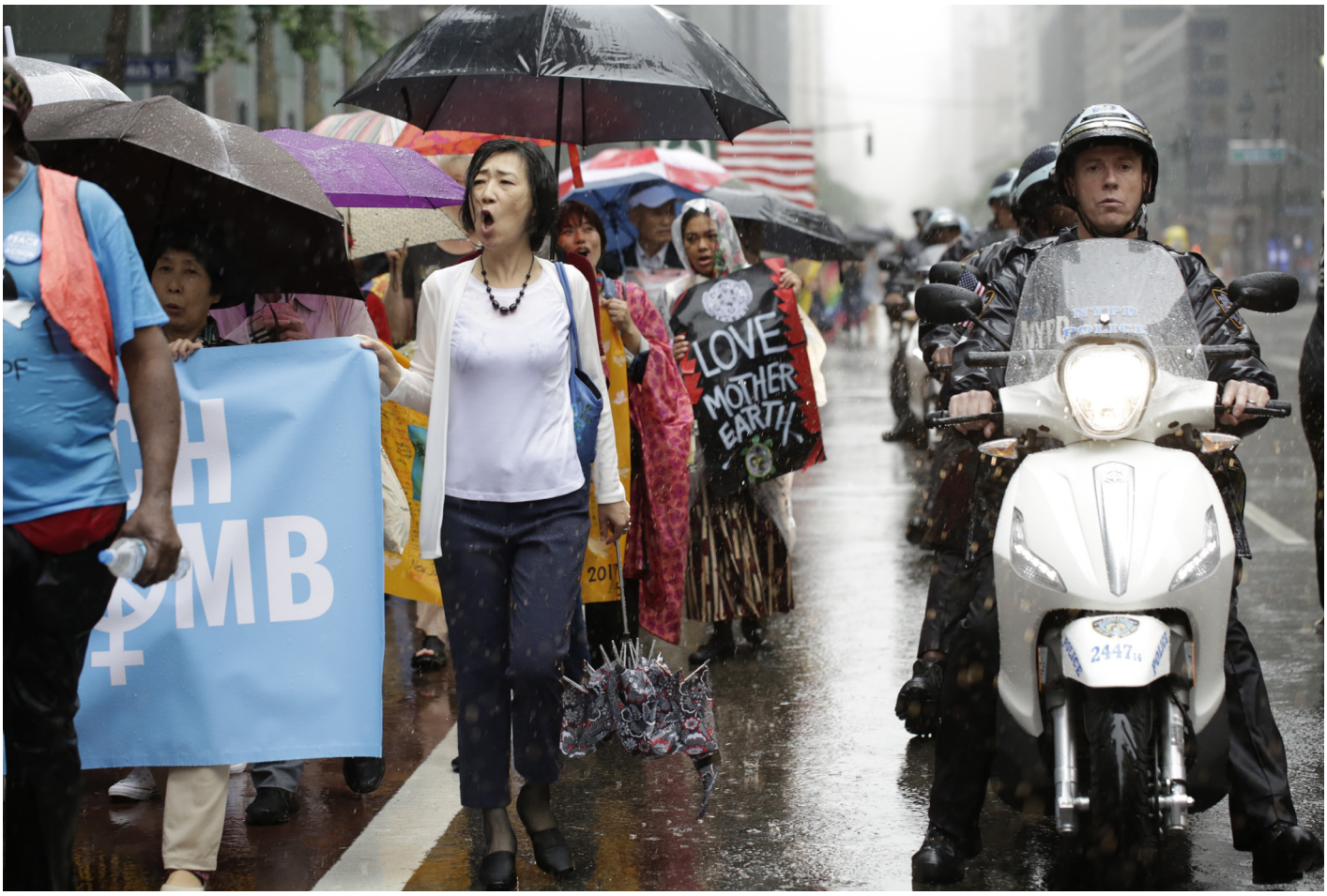


Photo: Women's March to Ban the Bomb, June 2017 © David Field / WILPF

Autonomous predators

This is one of the key dangers of autonomous weapon systems explored in the paper *Autonomous weapons and patriarchy*. The process of categorising and targeting human beings on the basis of specific characteristics or perceived "inherent criminality" will lead to increasing violence and entrenchment of gendered, racialised, and other forms of hierarchies.[35]

Yet, despite the fact that autonomous weapons, like Predator and Reaper drones before them, will be designed to hunt and execute human beings, among other possible tasks, their proponents assert that they will actually *minimise* violence. They suggest this will happen in two ways: that autonomous weapons will limit human casualties for the deploying force; and that they will limit civilian casualties in areas where they are used because they will be more "precise," not suffer from "emotive responses" like fear or retribution, and can be programmed to more precisely follow the rules of war.

All of these claims have been contested by those opposing their development;[36] this paper offers particular feminist critiques.

Invincibility, impunity, and accountability

To address the first assertion: that those using the weapon can deploy violence without fear of facing physical danger themselves.

The ability to project "influence without projecting vulnerability in the same ratio has favoured the development of aerospace capabilities resting firmly in the ever-evolving foundation of modern technology," wrote Major General Charles D. Link of the US Air Force in 2001.[37] The quest for "deploying military force regardless of frontiers" and "extending imperial power from the center over the world that constitutions its periphery"[38] long precedes the consideration of autonomous weapon systems. But this mission of "projecting power without projecting vulnerability" could find its purest expression in killer robots.

Like armed drones, the idea of an autonomous weapon system has an ethos of invulnerability to it. Such weapons would enable the deploying force to engage "the enemy" without any risk to their human personnel. But with invulnerability also comes a culture of impunity and unaccountability.[39]

Concerns about accountability for the actions of autonomous weapons that "accidentally" kill civilians or fail to comply with their programming in some way have been well articulated.[40] But what about accountability for actions that are fully consistent with the rules of engagement set by states that are still immoral or illegal? The use of armed drones by the US military has already demonstrated how the bounds of accountability are being contested and overridden, and how US soldiers and more broadly the United States benefits from a culture of impunity.

The analogy of sexual violence is useful in understanding how this works. A 2013 US Justice Department white paper declared that a drone strike can proceed "with the consent of

the host nation's government or after a determination that the host nation is unable or unwilling to suppress the threat," for example. This idea that the US military can launch a drone strike even without the "host" government's consent perpetuates the culture of domination that, as argued earlier, is a key component of the development of militarised masculinities.

Lorraine Bayard de Volo argues that this policy "demasculizes" the governments of host countries, which are "unable to protect their own borders against penetration by U.S. drones."[41] She also says it suggests the United States is the "self-appointed patriarch" and that "nations that do not consent are rendered, in effect, legally incapable of consent."[42]

The belief that a government can act with impunity is nothing new; but technologies like armed drones and autonomous weapon systems amplify the *expectation of impunity*. They help turn impunity into a norm, regardless of international law, human rights, or human well-being. This in turn risks fortifying the culture of impunity for violence, in particular sexual violence. Immunity for sexual violence thrives on the patriarchal pursuit of dominance and control—which in turn underpins the development of these technologies.

The myths and invisibilities of "precision killing"

To address the second assertion: that the use of autonomous weapons will actually result in less violence because they will be more "surgical" or "precise".

Through their armed drones, surveillance apparatus, data collection, and network of black sites, JSOC and the Central Intelligence Agency have created what John Nagl, a former "counterinsurgency advisor," describes as an "industrial-scale counterterrorism killing machine".[43] The development and use of autonomous weapons will further perpetuate this violence, not mitigate it. They will fit right into the Predator Empire; they will fit right into the arsenals of other states' or people looking to counter this empire.

Tools that are made for killing do not protect human life. In defiance of theories of nuclear deterrence or beliefs that "guns don't kill people," reality shows time and again that when there is a gun in the home or a bomb in an arsenal, sooner or later it is going to be used. Sooner or later, people will die.

Armed drones have already proven to be neither as efficient nor as accurate as their users may like their publics to believe. The tools and procedures used for determining targets for signature strikes have resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties in drone strikes.[44]

Yet, so much of the "industrialised killing" performed by the US military or other agencies is shrouded in secrecy, away from the eyes and understanding of most US citizens. So much of the violence committed everyday around the world in the name of "peace and security" never enters the consciousness of those who tacitly or explicitly support the policies that lead to the death and mayhem created by these weapons and military operations. "We're the dark matter," says a Navy SEAL. "We're the force that orders the universe but can't be seen."[45]

Like the patriarchal predation of sexual violence, the majority of drone strikes and black sites remain hidden, out of sight and out of mind. Statics of civilian deaths caused by drone strikes or about the realities of torture and death during detention, like statistics about rape and

other forms for gender-based violence, are vastly underreported and even more gravely unaccounted for in terms of justice or reparation.

Secrets and lies

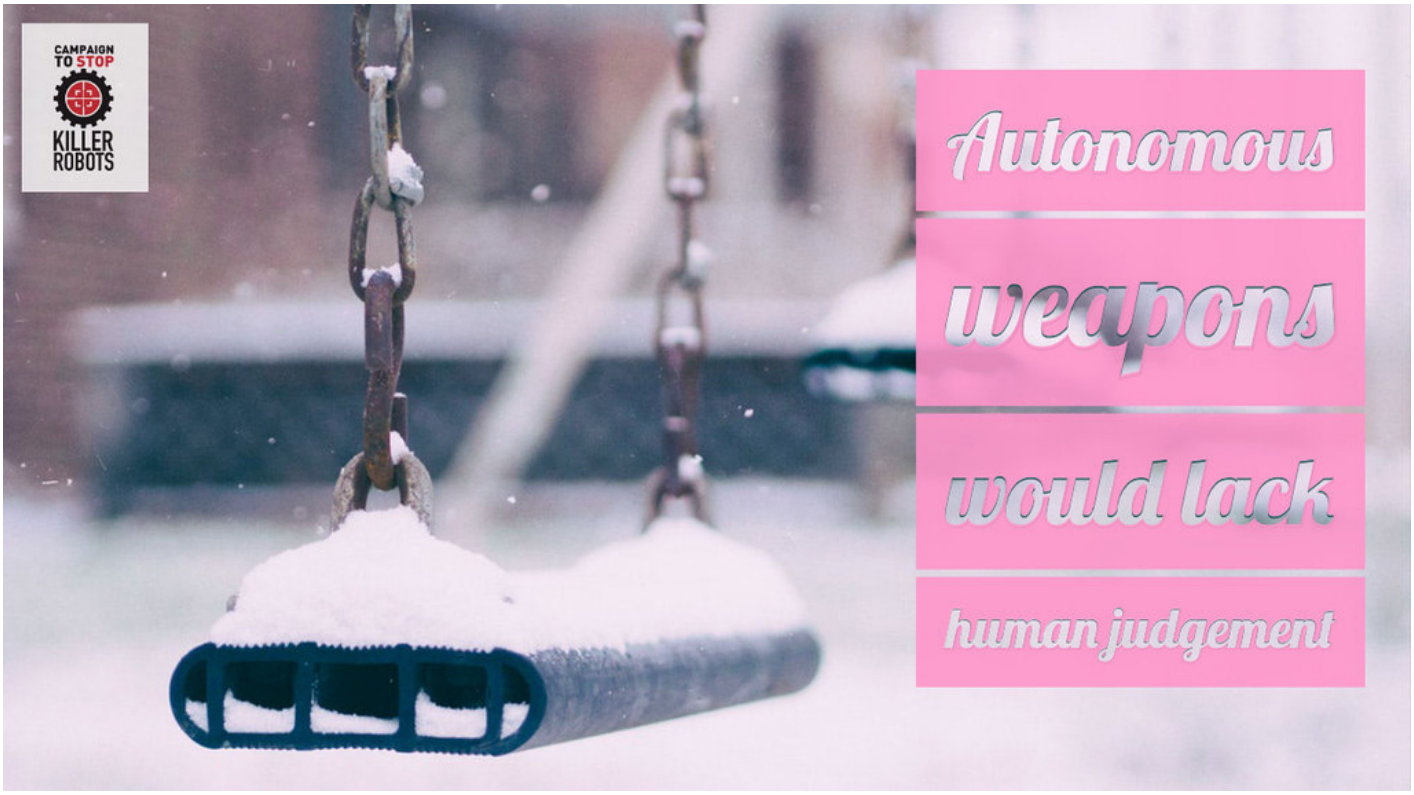
Automating violence further with autonomous weapon systems will only serve secrecy even more. It will also further annihilate accountability for harms caused.

When it comes to drone strikes, "The personality of the CIA analyst, the drone pilot, or even the president is largely irrelevant," notes Ian G. R. Shaw, "since the system swallows individual autonomy. This anonymizing effect alienates bureaucrats from the killing fields, such that the decision to take another's life is a technical concern."[46] When it comes to autonomous weapons, who will be held accountable for the death or injury of civilians? The engineer? The software developer? The commander? The machine itself?

But beyond this, who will be accountable for violence *intended*? For when the machine is programmed to target certain types of people, for when a machine executes a person based on a line of code and an array of sensors? Who is responsible for this horrific advancement in dehumanisation, in turning human beings into ones and zeros, in processing people as objects? And who is responsible for the knock-on effects of this dehumanising work, of the increasing normalisation and abstraction of violence in our world?

Automating GBV and violent masculinities

This increasing separation of distance between the perpetrator of violence and the victim of violence that autonomous weapons perpetuate has implications for the culture of militarised masculinities and patriarchal dominance that has led us here in the first place.



While drones require an operator and their commander to fly the machine, analyse data, and take decisions about firing upon targets, autonomous weapons would operate without meaningful human control.[47] Pre-programmed to identify, select, and engage targets, they would complete the separation of human body from battlefield.

This not only has a horrific impact on the dignity of those killed, but will also further entrench the culture of violence. The sense of "power" displayed through detached, mechanised violence inherent to an autonomous weapon system will likely reinforce the hegemonic norms of militarised masculinities. The "warrior ethos"—unemotional, detached, serious, and rational—will be perfected through the machine.

Furthermore, as this expression of the warrior ethos is preserved and protected through the use of autonomous weapons, it can simultaneously reproduce violent and militarised masculinities amongst the populations against which they are used. That is, the use of autonomous weapon systems use may facilitate the reproduction of the "masculine protector" role within communities suffering under the use of these predator machines. As seen already with the use of armed drones, extrajudicial killings with drones have produced not less but more violence and have been used by armed groups to foster recruitment.[48]

Assuming all military-age men to be potential or actual militants or combatants also entrenches the idea that men are violent and thus targetable. This devalues male life—it suggests men are relatively more expendable than women or others. It increases the vulnerability of men, exacerbating other risks adult civilian men face such as forced recruitment, aribtrary detention, and summary execution.[49]

More broadly, the reinforcement of gender norms through targeting men as militants works against the establishment and sustainment of a more equitable society. Framing men as the militants, as the protectors of their communities willing to take up arms, in turn reinforces notions of women as weak, as being in need of this protection. This continues to enable women's exclusion from authoritative social and political roles.[50]

It also reinforces the binary between women and men as weak and strong, as passive and violent, and refuses to engage with other identities and experiences that do not conform to this binary. Reinforcing violent masculinities reproduces the power asymmetries and gendered hierarchies that underpin many acts of gender-based violence against women, queer-identified people, or gender non-conforming people.

Conclusion

Recognising the inherent ability of autonomous weapon systems to facilitate GBV is important to understanding both the technical potential of these weapons as well as their potential to exacerbate the broader culture of sexual violence and the impunity afforded to perpetrators of such violence.

As they expand the possibilities of increasingly remote warfare and policing, autonomous weapons also threaten to reinforce the culture of militarised masculinities and the associated subordination of women and LGBTQ+ people, as well as people who have been racialised, those with disabilities, people of certain religions, etc. The ways in which technologies of remote violence such as drones and other technologies of surveillance and control already impact upon the lives of such people need to be considered in an assessment of autonomous weapon systems.

The development and use of weapons that enable governments, non-state armed groups, or others to programme a machine to target people based on sex or gender will lead to GBV. It will also further entrench gender essentialisms and intersectional discrimination. In this way, autonomous weapons will not only facilitate physical violence against certain individual people or groups but will also exacerbate structural violence against women, LGBTQ+ people, Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour, and people with disabilities.

Opposing the development of autonomous weapon systems is crucial for the protection of human rights and dignity, including from gender-based violations. The extent of the harms made possible through the increasing remoteness, abstraction, and automation of violence through such weapon systems may not fully be known at this time, but based on what we know about how violence is perpetrated now—by militaries, police, armed groups, etc.—the harms are well imaginable. Drawing a line from what we have already seen with armed drones, surveillance apparatus, and the technologies, policies, and practices of war and carceral systems, we know what is likely to happen if autonomous weapons are developed and deployed. Preventing this is crucial to creating the possibility of a less violent, more equitable future.

Endnotes

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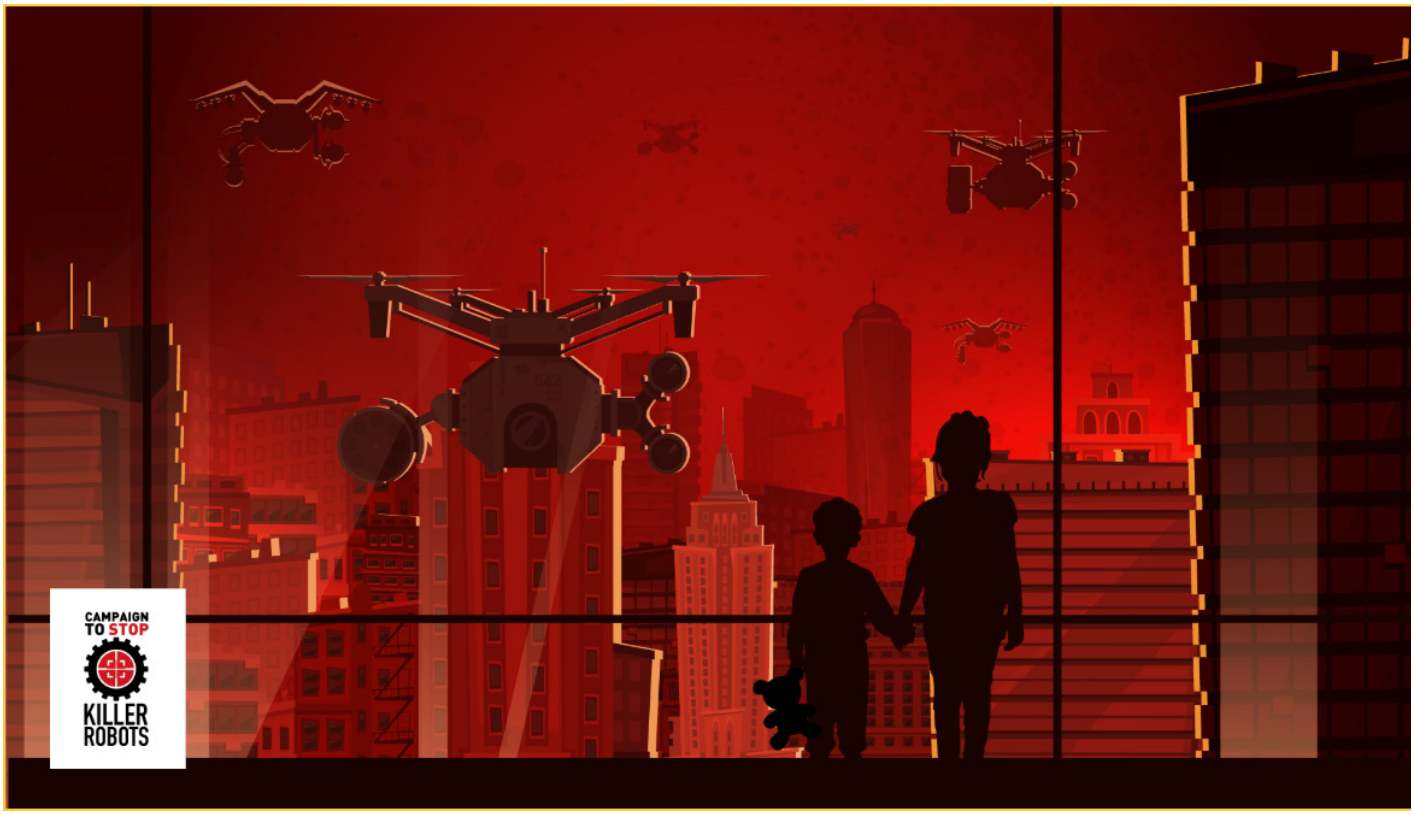

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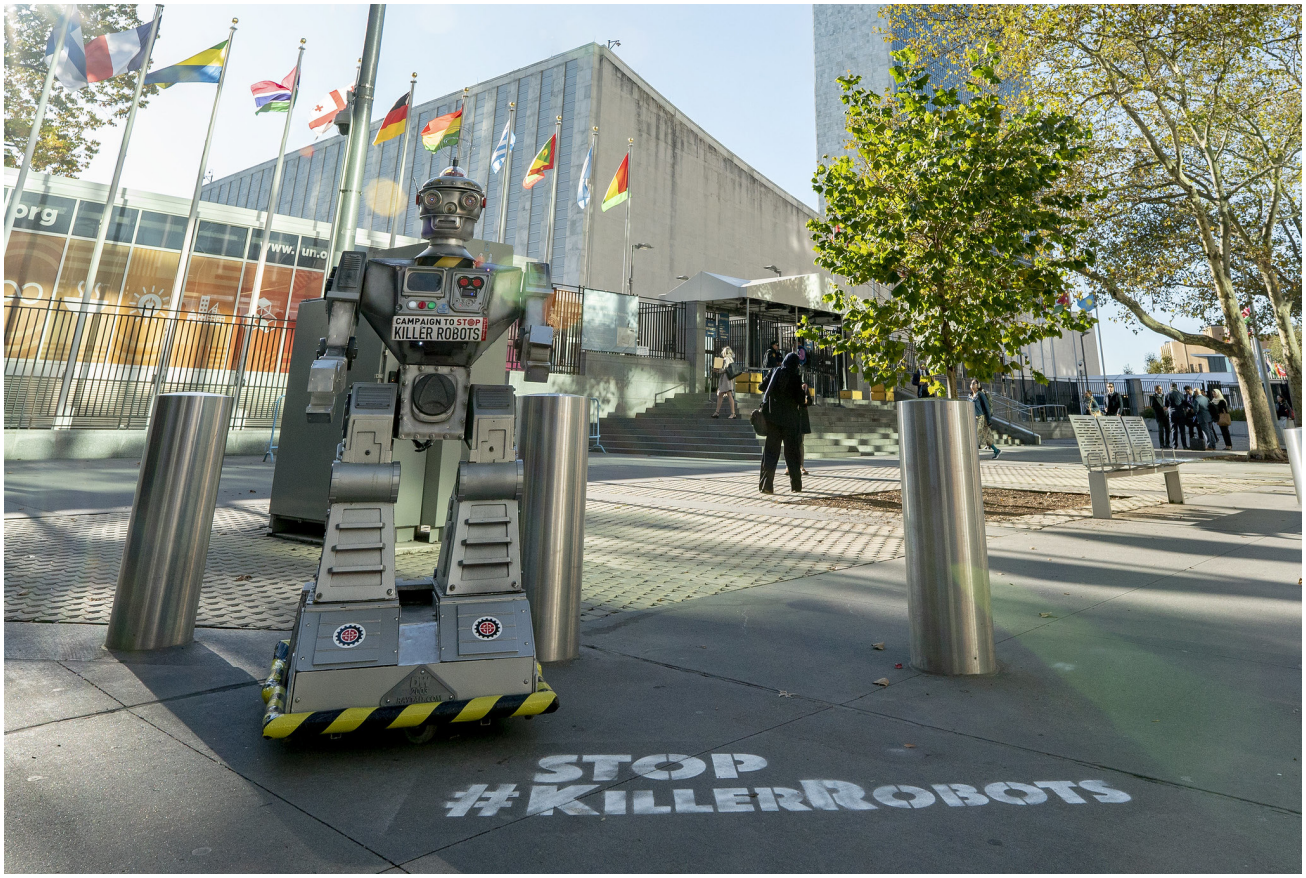

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Reaching Critical Will

A PROGRAMME OF THE
WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR
PEACE & FREEDOM

CAMPAIGN TO STOP
KILLER ROBOTS

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest women's peace organisation in the world. It is a global feminist movement for peace, disarmament, economic and social justice, and environmental protection.

Reaching Critical Will, WILPF's disarmament programme, works for disarmament and for an end to war, militarism, and violence. It also investigates and exposes patriarchal and gendered aspects of weapons and war. RCW monitors and analyses international processes and works in coalitions with other civil society groups to achieve change, provide timely and accurate reporting on all relevant conferences and initiatives, and maintain a comprehensive online archive of all statements, resolutions, and other primary documents on disarmament.

WILPF is a steering group member of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, a global coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to ban autonomous weapon systems and thereby retain meaningful human control over the use of force.

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