

Feminist Foreign Policy in Practice:



A Path to Regulating Autonomous Weapons Systems

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The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) describes autonomous weapons systems (AWS) as systems with the capacity to identify and engage targets without human intervention.¹ AWS use sensors to gather information from their surroundings and can independently initiate or trigger an attack based on a predefined "target profile."

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called for a prohibition on AWS that operate without human oversight, with the aim of establishing a binding instrument by 2026. Since 2016, the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) within the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) has been engaged in deliberations on lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS).

However, the negotiation process has been hindered by structural inequalities. In addition, the limited capacity of countries from the Global South to participate substantively in these discussions has resulted in inadequate consideration of critical issues, including racial bias, environmental impacts, and technological disparities. Furthermore, the restricted participation of civil society and other non-state actors in the CCW poses a threat to the effectiveness of the forum.

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In light of the significant risks associated with the unregulated development and deployment of AWS, including the lack of accountability, the unpredictable behavior of AI in complex environments, and the erosion of human dignity by removing human control from life- and-death decisions, it is imperative to explore innovative approaches to arms control and disarmament. In this context, Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) is emerging as a crucial framework for addressing the complex challenges posed by these technologies. FFP not only prioritizes the advancement of gender equality, but also the dismantling of global power structures.

FFP advocates for a shift in focus from military security to human security, prioritizing the protection of civilians and the prevention of harm. This approach recognizes that the development and deployment of AWS can have far-reaching consequences for human rights, international humanitarian law, and global stability. A key aspect of FFP is its emphasis on intersectionality, recognizing that the impact of AWS on different communities and individuals can vary greatly depending on factors such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, this approach encourages policymakers to consider the diverse perspectives and experiences of those affected by these technologies.

Countries that have adopted a FFP should proactively advocate for a legally binding instrument on AWS. Achieving this objective requires a comprehensive and inclusive policy process, one that incorporates diverse perspectives and expertise from various stakeholders, including the Global South, marginalized groups, and civil society organizations. This process should involve a multi-faceted examination of AWS risks and dangers, considering ethical, humanitarian, human rights, legal, security, and technological aspects. By fostering inclusive and collaborative policy-making, a more effective and equitable framework for regulating AWS can be developed, ultimately prioritizing human security, dignity, and well-being.

Policy recommendations

- 1. Elaboration of the position on human control:** The position on human control, as well as the two-tiered approach, needs to be further developed, including a prohibition on AWS that target humans. Ethical concerns and human rights considerations need to be given greater emphasis.
- 2. Develop national guidelines:** Governments should develop national policies for AWS to establish clear legal and ethical standards, counter unchecked developments, and ensure that the use of these technologies aligns with international humanitarian norms.

- 3. Integration of AWS into 1325 National Action Plans:** National Action Plans for the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 "Women, Peace and Security" should consider AWS as an emerging technology in armed conflicts. Additionally, it is important to strengthen the role of women and marginalized groups in the arms control of AWS through targeted measures, such as the "Women in AI" fellowship from the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research.
- 4. Establishment of an exchange format with civil society:** A regular dialogue format with civil society on AWS should be established to consolidate expertise from various fields and to meaningfully involve these actors in the organization of expert events on AWS.
- 5. Support for research projects:** Research projects that address the gender perspective on AWS, algorithmic biases, and other ethical issues should be actively supported to enable informed policy decisions and to educate decision-makers accordingly.
- 6. Strengthening dialogue with citizens:** The dialogue with citizens regarding AWS must be intensified to facilitate a broader societal debate on the associated risks and concerns.
- 7. Leadership role in the United Nations:** Governments should take a proactive approach to champion a resolution within the UN aimed at establishing an internationally legally binding instrument on AWS through an inclusive multi-stakeholder process.
- 8. Capacity-building in the Global South:** Efforts to build capacity in countries of the Global South regarding AWS must be intensified to ensure their meaningful participation in intergovernmental discussions. Strengthening South-South partnerships and networks is crucial, as is the increased involvement of countries in the Global North in initiatives led by countries in the Global South on AWS.
- 9. Inclusion of AWS in Feminist Foreign Policy Forums:** The topic of AWS should be placed on the agenda of "Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy" fora and other events related to FFP, and should be reflected in concluding statements and reports.
- 10. Programs to empower young voices in the field of AWS:** International programs for young people in the area of AWS should be promoted to strengthen the role of future generations, such as the "Next Generation Programme" from the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation.