We meet again in Geneva as civilians are dying around the world from the use of conventional weapons. Civilian deaths and injuries from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas have gone up for the third year in a row. Prohibited weapons such as cluster munitions have been used in recent conflicts. Explosive remnants of war continue to kill civilians long after conflicts have ended. Meanwhile, profits continue to soar from the design, manufacture, and sale of ever more weapons.

The bombs and other explosive weapons killing civilians in armed conflicts around the world should be controlled by international law and moral conscience. Instead, they are sold for profit to those who use them for political gain. Those selling the weapons are complicit in the deaths of civilians; the destruction of their villages, towns, and cities; and the mass displacement that follows.

There seems to be a sense of entitlement from some countries to produce, use, and sell weapons as they wish. This entitlement extends to the development of new destructive technologies that challenge our existing framework of international law as well as ethics and morality. We already see this with armed drones, the use of which has raised serious concerns about violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, lack of transparency, civilian casualties, extension of the battlefield, and lowering the threshold for the use of force.

WILPF, which is a partner organisation of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, is also gravely concerned at the possibility of weapons that may operate without meaningful human control. Autonomous weapons go beyond remotely-controlled drones, devolving life and death decision-making to software and sensors. There is something especially cynically abhorrent in the idea of human beings assigning the killing of other human beings to a technological creation. A preemptive ban on fully autonomous weapons is necessary to ensure the retention of meaningful human control over targeting and attack decisions.

We welcome the fact that governments have started to discuss this issue at the international level. We encourage delegations here at this meeting to establish an open-ended Group of Governmental Experts in 2016 to explore the concept of meaningful human control and begin work for the negotiation of a legally-binding instrument prohibiting autonomous weapons.

The development of such technology is not inevitable. It is the culture of militarism, emboldened by profits and power, which drives us in that direction. We can and must challenge that culture. To do so, we must also challenge the culture of patriarchy.

We know that women, men, and others are often exposed to different patterns of violence and that the use of certain weapons can have disproportionate or differential effects based on sex and gender. Small arms and light weapons are frequently used to facilitate acts of gender-based violence, which disproportionately affects women. Armed drones are disproportionately used to target men.

Yet only women are considered inherently vulnerable. But they are not. Terms that highlight the need to protect “women and children” are highly problematic. Women are not legally, politically, or physically comparable as a group to children. To treat them as such reinforces persistent constructions of women as the “weaker sex” in need of protection by “powerful” men. The further trend of categorising “women and children” as innocent civilians also perpetuates a notion of men as automatic militants and as more expendable.

Much of the discussion on disarmament fuels the highly problematic gender constructions of men who are violent and powerful and women that are vulnerable and need to be protected. This framing enables the exclusion of women from authoritative social and political roles here and elsewhere. It is also used to
construct a feminised and devalued notion of peace as unattainable, unrealistic, weak, and even undesirable. This construction dictates what ideas are feminine and which are masculine, with a clear bias towards the masculine as rational and realistic. This means that even when there is gender diversity in discussions or negotiations, the ideas and positions voiced in the room tend to conform to the dominant perspective in order to be taken seriously.

Gender perspectives in disarmament, peace, and security must be about exposing and challenging this state of affairs, not simply about including more women in the existing systems of structural inequalities and violent masculinities. We need an approach to women’s participation and gender mainstreaming that seeks to prevent humanitarian suffering without categorising women as vulnerable victims; that promotes a positive role for women in ending conflict rather than participating in it; and that includes a critique of the gendered dimensions of militarism and armed violence. With this kind of agenda, we can help ensure that the instruments we have on both weapons and women contribute to the reduction and prevention of armed conflict and armed violence.

*WILPF is the oldest women’s peace organisation in the world. Reaching Critical Will is its disarmament programme and represents WILPF in the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, the International Network on Explosive Weapons, and other civil society coalitions for disarmament and arms control.*