

Feminist Foreign Policy and Lethal Autonomous Weapons

A Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy Briefing

The Issue

Lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs) are fully autonomous weaponry with no meaningful human interaction once programmed for operation. Based on algorithms and data analysis capabilities, LAWs would determine and fire upon targets entirely independent of human interaction or oversight. This is worrying for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, human bias in the development of technology raises important questions about how this would play out in technology that is specifically designed to take human life.¹ Similarly, operating without human judgement raises concerns about the ability of LAWs to perform the nuanced strategic decision-making skills necessary to remain within the bounds of international and wartime law.² And as the nature of these weapons makes them fully autonomous, it is unclear what parties would be held responsible for unlawful actions taken by LAWs, leaving an accountability gap that makes it more difficult to hold those in power to account and ensure justice is possible for victims.³ Once on the market, there is also a strong risk that LAWs will be utilised in questionable scenarios to reinforce systemic violence. Lastly, it is impossible to guarantee LAWs cannot be hacked. In short, the potential for mass human rights violations is rampant.

Key Figures

- 12 countries are developing or currently use partially autonomous weapons⁴
- 61% of the global public oppose the development of LAWs in 2018, compared to 56% in 2017⁵
- 28 countries have called for a ban on LAWs⁶

Background

Over 380 partially autonomous weapons are in development or have already been deployed by at least 12 countries, including China, France, Israel, Republic of Korea, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁷ Though the technology for LAWs is not yet in existence, General Mark Milley, former Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, has gone on the record to say their use will be widespread within a matter of years.⁸

At the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, we are partnering with the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots in calling for a preemptive ban on LAWs. The potential for mass atrocities and human rights violations are too great a risk, and we see no reasonable circumstance in which these weapons can be justified in times of war or peace. To date, 28 countries have called for a ban on LAWs.⁹ At the Convention on Conventional Weapons in November 2018, it was decided that diplomatic talks on LAWs would continue, however, there was no clear indication of a timeline or objective on negotiating a treaty.¹⁰

Feminist Foreign Policy and LAWs

A feminist foreign policy addresses the root causes of violence and insecurity by calling for an institutional overhaul of foreign policy and national security. CFFP takes an intersectional approach to our usage of feminism and utilises it as a tool to decode power relations. When applying this political approach to LAWs, a series of issues are revealed.¹¹

1. Utilising LAWs reinforces a threat-based approach to security. A feminist foreign policy framework calls for a reorientation of how security is understood. Instead of using weapons and the threat of violence to maintain peace, a more holistic approach is encouraged which includes promoting diplomacy, collaboration, and equality focused initiatives over expanding destructive forces.
2. LAWs abstract the consequences of weapon detonation. With no human intervention in the process of taking human life, the weight of such a decision is diluted in an automated process. This makes it easier to dehumanise targets and justify the usage of these weapons. A feminist foreign policy calls for the precise opposite of this and encourages a strong link between recognising the impact of policy and the political decision making process.
3. The risk of LAWs reflecting human bias around gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity are high. It's well known that the bias of those creating specific technologies is reflected in the output of their work.¹² Our world is built on a patriarchal, colonial, imperialist, and capitalist foundation and naturally, these values will be reflected in the products, and particularly, the weapons we produce. Without human interaction to counter that bias in real time, the risk of wrongful death is high.

Learn More

To learn more about advocating for a ban on LAWs, CFFP invites you to follow and engage with the work of the following organisations:

The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots is the leading organisation advocating for a preemptive ban on LAWs. See their Campaigner's Kit here to learn more about advocating for a ban.

Reaching Critical Will, a project of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, has published a feminist guide to killer robots.

Human Rights Watch does work around the arms trade with the ultimate aim "to protect civilians affected by conflict and its deadly legacy".

References

15

1. Samuel, S. (2019). Study finds a potential risk with self-driving cars: failure to detect dark-skinned pedestrians. [online] Vox. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/3/5/18251924/self-driving-car-racial-bias-study-autonomous-vehicle-dark-skin> [Accessed 11 Aug. 2019].
2. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (2018). A WILPF Guide to Killer Robots.
3. Stopkillerrobots.org. (2019). Killer Robots. [online] Available at: <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/learn/#problem> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2019].
4. Busby, M. (2019). Killer robots: pressure builds for ban as governments meet. [online] The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/09/killer-robots-pressure-builds-for-ban-as-governments-meet> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2019].
5. Stopkillerrobots.org. (2019). Global poll shows 61% oppose Killer Robots. [online] Available at: <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/2019/01/global-poll-61-oppose-killer-robots/> [Accessed 11 Aug. 2019].
6. Campaign to Stop Killer Robots (2018). Country Views on Killer Robots. [online] Available at: https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/KRC_CountryViews22Nov2018.pdf [Accessed 13 Aug. 2019].
7. Busby, M. (2019). Killer robots: pressure builds for ban as governments meet. [online] The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/09/killer-robots-pressure-builds-for-ban-as-governments-meet> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2019].
8. Haltiwanger, J. (2017). Russia's military has new robot tank it says fights better than human soldiers. [online] Newsweek. Available at: <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-military-new-robot-tank-fights-better-human-soldiers-706836> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2019].
9. Campaign to Stop Killer Robots (2018). Country Views on Killer Robots. [online] Available at: https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/KRC_CountryViews22Nov2018.pdf [Accessed 13 Aug. 2019].
10. Human Rights Watch. (2019). Poll Shows Strong Opposition to 'Killer Robots'. [online] Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/22/poll-shows-strong-opposition-killer-robots> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2019].
11. Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. (2019). Feminist Foreign Policy. [online] Available at: <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/feminist-foreign-policy> [Accessed 14 Aug. 2019].
12. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (2018). A WILPF Guide to Killer Robots.