The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom has just concluded its 32nd International Congress in Accra, Ghana. While there, WILPF’s African Sections held a meeting on autonomous weapons. They recognised that while their countries may not be the ones to develop and use these technologies, their countries will become the battlegrounds for the testing and deployment of killer robots, the same as they have become for armed drones. These activists know that it will be the rich countries using these weapons against the poor—and the rich within countries using it against their own poor, through policing and internal oppression.

Throughout WILPF’s 103-year history, we have seen that weapons symbolise power. Whether it is small arms or atomic bombs, weapons have been developed and used to dominate others. We also know that the production and proliferation of weapons means profits for corporations and their leaders.

The potential development of autonomous weapon systems must be seen in the contexts of power and profit.

We can see already the corporate interests in the development of these weapons. We can map the connections between ministries of defence, universities, and robotics and tech companies. We are inspired and heartened that many tech workers, academics, and scientists have rejected the weaponisation of their technologies, and have called for a ban on autonomous weapons. But we know that big corporations are already looking ahead to the profits they can make under the guise of “technological advancement”.

But what is this advancement? An autonomous weapon, using algorithms and software to determine and engage targets reduces people to objects. While this may be true with any weapon, the development of killer robots points to an increasing remoteness and abstraction of violence. It suggests the further erosion of the value of human life. The “erasure of human suffering in war” is an element throughout history in official accounts of conflict, but it is arguably enhanced with the violence that will be perpetrated with autonomous weapons if they are developed.

Like the Irish delegation, we are concerned with the perpetuation and amplification of bias in the programming of these weapons. We are concerned that these weapons will be coded with the masculinised power of death and domination. We are worried these weapons will be used to commit acts of gender-based violence. We are worried about the ways in which these weapons could be programmed with racial bias and discrimination. We will discuss some of these concerns at a side event tomorrow, organised with the government of Canada and several of our Campaign to Stop Killer Robots partners.

We need to use this moment in time, before autonomous weapons are developed and deployed, to interrogate the path we are on and to forge a different way ahead. It is not a luxury we often have, so we must seize this moment to prevent us from becoming the worst possible version of ourselves. Today is the International Day Against Nuclear Tests, which provides a useful moment to reflect upon what can happen if we don’t prevent the development of a technology capable of incredible and unpredictable violence.

WILPF, which is a partner of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, urges the negotiation of a ban on autonomous weapon systems. As the Austrian delegation suggested yesterday, the best way to work out the remaining differences of approach and opinion is to start negotiating. Only by developing a legally binding instrument can we ensure that meaningful human control is retained over the critical functions of weapon systems and over the use of force. We welcome the many proposals for a negotiating mandate next year, which are clearly supported by the majority of states participating in these discussions. We look forward to collaborating with you to build a less violent future for us all.