

None of the UN Experts Debating Killer Robots Are Women

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May 14, 2014 // 03:20 PM EST

Steve Goose of Human Rights Watch, Noel Sharkey of the International Committee on Robot Arms Control, and Jody Williams of the Nobel Women's Initiative will lobby the UN to ban lethal robots.

Experts from around the globe are currently gathered at the United Nations to debate whether machines that can decide on their own to kill a human being should be legal. And of the 18 experts presenting their views during the three-day conference, not a single one is female.

Clearly this is not ideal. It's also not terribly surprising; the fields of defense, engineering, and diplomacy are notoriously male-dominated. But the lack of representation is particularly unsettling when security, peace, and disarmament are the issues on the table. Legalizing lethal robots would elevate the ease of killing to an unprecedented level—it's not a decision you want to leave half the world's population out of.

"Somehow it implies that women are not capable of being seriously involved in creating our own security in a secure world," Nobel Laureate Jody Williams told me in a phone call from Geneva, where the first UN debate on the fate of killer robots is underway. "To be blunt, I find it fucking offensive."

Williams is one of two speakers to point out the gender disparity to the delegation of 50 governments on opening day yesterday—the other being the representative from Norway. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 for spearheading the successful effort to ban land mines, and is now chair of the Nobel Women's Initiative and a member of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots.

When I spotted the zero-women stat on the Campaign's website, I immediately wondered if the activists' chances of banning lethal autonomous machines would be better if a few more X chromosomes were present at the debate. After all, the argument that a male-dominated society is prone to wage war is well-worn at this point.

But when I talked to Human Rights Watch spokesperson Mary Wareham, she was hesitant to draw that conclusion outright. "It's something that we have to point out if things are going to change, but I'm not sure we can read too much into it."

She's right: A 0-18 ratio is hardly justification for the claim that there's a gender-determined predisposition toward killing machines. Williams, however, was not afraid to make that claim.

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She argued that throughout history, war and weapons were forged by men, and that's not going to change until a more diverse perspective is included in the defense and security decisions shaping the future.

"Men make war, men make the weapons to make war, and men make money from making the weapons that fuel war," Williams said. "When they don't include women's voices in the discussion, then it's all men talking to each other with their testosterone and their weapons systems. And they all love them."

She argued that women address the issue from a slightly different perspective. "We bring strong discussion of morality and ethics that wouldn't be happening otherwise."

Well, I'm not sure about that. Plenty of men are interested in the ethics of robots, killer ones and otherwise. But that viewpoint can get cloudy when there's billions of dollars to be made from ethically-questionable machines like autonomous decision-making drones that drop bombs, Williams argued.

"We really do believe that sustainable peace is possible, but not if you listen to men who are used to seeing a weapon they think is cool and pursuing it," she said. "A whole bunch of men congratulating each other on their expertness and many of them supporting the military-industrial complex ... supporting their belief that they can make any weapon they want, unless, once they've made it, they figure out it might violate law."

"It's their perspective that we're going to hear over and over and over again and is going to shape the debate," she said.

That may be an extreme way to put it, but doesn't change the fact that gender inequality in positions of real power is pervasive: from disarmament to engineering to foreign policy and so on.

So what to do about it? As Wareham told me, simply pointing out the lack of diversity at the conference—ethnic diversity, too—is a start. The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots has also compiled a list of female experts on lethal robots to make it easier for the UN Convention on Conventional Weapons to include a more gender-balanced perspective next time around.

"Just keep nipping at their heels," Williams said. "Peacefully, of course."

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