Informal remarks from the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom to the Second Substantive Session of the UN OEWG on ICTs
12 February 2020

Thank you, chairman. The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom appreciate the opportunity to address the Working Group today. It has been a very interesting and stimulating few days; it is evident that everyone has come prepared to engage substantively on all of the agenda items, which demonstrates the importance attached to this subject by the international community and why it is necessary that a more open body like this Working Group has been established.

These remarks will focus on a few points some of which correspond with the questions you highlighted in the working paper and also responds to some of the discussion that has taken place here since Monday.

The first point responds to the question: “should Member States unilaterally declare to refrain from militarization/offensive use of ICTs?” It has been interesting, and useful, to hear in the last two days more elaboration of positions about this issue of militarization than has occurred in past.

WILPF opposes and has spoken against the militarization of cyber space in past statement to the OEWG, and through joint NGO statements that have been delivered to the First Committee in recent years. This is line with our organizational mandate to challenge militarism, patriarchy, and capitalism as the roots of war and violence.

In listening over the last few days, the explanation that it is that is acceptable to develop or integrate offensive cyber policies and capabilities because everyone else is, or that it is somehow too late to stop militarization, is concerning. This is the basic premise of arms racing and look where that got us with other tools of fighting. Every conscious and deliberately made decision to use digital technologies as a tool or as a medium for harm or for violence is another step along a path toward greater and greater militarization of relevant technologies. This is a path we don’t need to be on and can turn off of—but it is one that is being increasingly staked out by states and other actors who are pursuing aggressive policies and approaches in this area, which naturally incentivises others to do the same in order to keep up, and so it goes.

Sometimes, when listening to these discussions, it sounds as if many have already given up on not militarizing cyber space, and now want to just work out the best form of damage control. WILPF believes that that is a conversation that still needs to be had and that it would be in keeping with the stated purposes of the United Nations to do more to challenge this, and demand, possibly through recommendations of this Group, or as acknowledgement, that we need more more than just damage control but explicit measures that encourage cyber peace.

Secondly, on the subject of norms we agree with many others that there is a need to increase awareness and understanding of the 2015 norms, and build a sense of ownership and stakeholdership in them which will foster implementation. This may mean being open to their adaptation or expansion, to reflect national and regional realities and priorities that were maybe not present when the norms were first agreed. We urge states to set the example by adhering to the agreed norms themselves and draw attention to actions that are contrary to the norms in order to increase accountability and build credibility for the norms.

Our third point concerns the growing expressions of support for a human-centric approach, which have been stronger and higher in number than one might have suspected at the start of this process
and is an approach that WILPF very much supports. But it’s possible that human-centric means different things to different people, theoretically and practically. It could be a recommendation in the report to ask for space to further unpack or explore this in concrete terms.

It may be that incorporating a gender perspective into discussions of international cyber security would be a concrete aspect of a human-centric approach. But we acknowledge that while there is a strong evidence base about online gender-based violence (GBV) and the human rights dimensions of this issue, less is known about how malicious international cyber operations between states affect people differently on the basis of gender or other characteristics that may put them in positions of vulnerability, and how that can be better accounted for in the development of norms or principles for state behaviour. As an organisation that has long been at the forefront of feminist advocacy for disarmament, WILPF is excited to be undertaking new research in this regard, with the support of the Government of Canada. Given that numerous delegations have highlighted gender considerations in their statements this week, and that others are undertaking specific initiatives to advance women’s participation and gender diversity in the OEWG, the Group could consider inclusion of these points in its report.

Finally, it has been gratifying to hear many expressions of support for improved and on-going multi-stakeholder engagement in the OEWG, and regret that non-ECOSOC organisations have again been shut out. There are credibility and practical risks to shutting out stakeholders, especially those with a role to play in implementing decisions taken by the OEWG and can provide subject matter expertise. At the same time, it is worth remembering that participation in a global meeting is only one aspect of a multi-stakeholdership; national dialogue processes and consultations between government representatives and a range of civil society actors are encouraged.

Thank you.