Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom

Informal remarks to the Chair’s informal consultation
UN Open-ended Working Group on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies (2021-2025)

24 March 2022

- WILPF delivered remarks during the December 2021 session and provided a written submission at that time which covered a range of OEWG-relevant topics, including threats, norms, law, and accountability, and civil society access. Our views on those point still hold. Our remarks today will focus on the subject of gender, which may not be in the Chair’s guiding questions but nonetheless was addressed by many states in their interventions at the first substantive session in December 2021. WILPF feels it is important to uphold and build on the good gains made in this area in the 2019-2021 OEWG (OEWG I).

- The final report of that OEWG gives us guidance in this area, in terms of what was agreed to by states while the Chair’s Summary contains other ideas that were proposed but ultimately not included in the report.

- At a minimum, building on those gains means 1) continuing to welcome and enable a high participation of women delegates in OEWG substantive sessions; 2) continuing to welcome women’s effective and meaningful participation and leadership in decision making processes related to the use of ICTs; 3) considering ways to narrow the gender digital divide; and 4) ensuring that cyber capacity-building is gender sensitive.

- But more can be done with the time ahead in the second OEWG. The following suggestions draw from past ideas that WILPF has tabled, as well as proposals made by other civil society organisations such as the Association for Progressive Communications; by states; and from an online briefing with the Women in Cyber Fellows held in November 2021 and co-organised with UNIDIR.

- Building on the OEWG I report’s recommendation on gender-sensitive capacity building, the time allocated to capacity-building in substantive sessions could be utilised to explore what gender-sensitive capacity building looks like practically possibly by hearing from experts engaged in this work on what they see are the gender-related gaps, challenges, and good practice. The OEWG could even agree to develop guidelines for states and relevant stakeholder on mainstreaming gender into cyber capacity-building.

- The Chair could encourage gender diversity in his written communications with member states about forthcoming OEWG sessions, and at the same time, member
states should take steps to be diverse in their delegation composition, and in related events, panels, etc.

- Increasing research and data collection on the gendered impacts of cyber operations and broader cyber related issues has been highlighted as necessary to inform collective understanding of the problem and develop gender-sensitive response, whether technical response to cyber incidents or policy development. The OEWG could encourage this.

- A future OEWG substantive session could include a dedicated meeting on gender. As Canada has suggested, this might see experts from government, civil society and the private sector providing insights and working with states to formulate concrete recommendations on this issue.

- Alternately, to mainstream gender across the OEWG’s thematic areas of focus, the Chair could integrate gender within the guiding questions provided states, or introduce a specific gender-related outcome to obtain agreement on. This might include, for instance, consideration of how the normative framework is or could be operationalised in a gender-sensitive way; of how the threats discussed by the OEWG effect gender-differentiated harms; or they could relate to capacity-building, as discussed earlier.

- Finally, states could be encouraged to report on gender in their submissions to the UN Secretary-General’s annual report on ICTs. A set of guiding questions could be developed in this regard and potentially endorsed by the OEWG to assist states in their submissions; this would also help to expand the pool of available information on this subject and give it prominence.

- As a closing point, it’s helpful to remember that discussing or working to advance gender perspectives in the cyber OEWG isn’t working in a vacuum. It aligns with commitments that most, if not all, states have already made under the Women, Peace and Security Agenda; Agenda 2030; and various human rights conventions. This is merely another space to fulfill commitments and apply knowledge and experience gained.