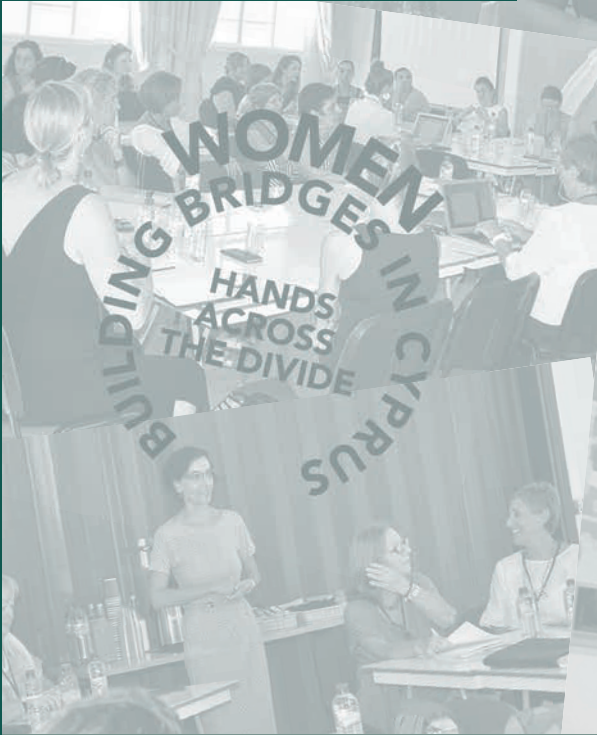


The Role of Civil Society and Gender in Reconciliation:

Lessons from the Good Friday Agreement



PCC REPORT 1/2019



Ambasáid na hÉireann
Embassy of Ireland



**THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY
AND GENDER IN RECONCILIATION:
LESSONS FROM
THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT**

Report 1/2019

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INTRODUCTION

Under the auspices of the Embassy of Ireland in Cyprus and PRIO Cyprus Centre, in partnership with UNFICYP, a series of events on “The Role of Civil Society and Gender in Reconciliation – Lessons from the Good Friday Agreement” took place between 22 and 25 September 2018. Professor Monica McWilliams and Dr Avila Kilmurray, both founder members of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC), a cross-community political party established to participate in the peace process in Northern Ireland, travelled to Cyprus for a series of engagements with women’s groups and activists, academics, students, and female members of political parties. The programme was funded by Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and it coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.

The engagements sought to explore ways in which the experiences of the NIWC could be relevant to the peace process and to women in Cyprus. During the visit, Monica McWilliams and Avila Kilmurray shared their experiences from Northern Ireland, and work they have done in Colombia and Syria, while seeking to offer solutions and practical suggestions to women and civil society actors in Cyprus. The series of events showcased how women and feminist actors, who were marginalised in the NI peace process, mobilised to ensure that their perspectives were reflected in the NI peace process and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

BIOS



Monica McWilliams, Professor of Women's Studies, based in the Transitional Justice Institute at the University of Ulster, was the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission from 2005 to 2011. She was the co-founder of the NIWC and was elected to a seat at the Multi-Party Peace Negotiations, which led to the Good Friday (Belfast) Peace Agreement in 1998. She served as a member of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly from 1998 to 2003. She is Chair of Interpeace, an international organisation for peacebuilding.



Avila Kilmurray is director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, a position she has held since 1994. Dr Kilmurray was active in the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, was a founding member of the NIWC, and was a member of the coalition's negotiating team for the Belfast Agreement. She was appointed Honorary Professor in the Transitional Justice Institute, Ulster University and remains actively involved in the area of philanthropy and peacebuilding, including with the Social Change Initiative.

EVENTS SUMMARY

The public events that took place were structured around screenings of the documentary film “Wave Goodbye to Dinosaurs” which tells the story of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition and its influence on the negotiations which led to the Good Friday Agreement. Four such events took place – in Paphos, Famagusta and Nicosia (at the Home for Cooperation and the University of Cyprus).

The film was subtitled in Greek and Turkish, and interpretation was provided as necessary at all events to ensure that the events were inclusive of those who are not proficient English speakers.

In addition to the public events, Monica and Avila also met and held workshops with a range of civil society stakeholders, with a particular focus on representatives of women’s groups. The also received a briefing from Seed: the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development and met with the women Ambassadors accredited to Cyprus. The initiative also facilitated discussions on future possibilities for a more coordinated Irish approach to promoting women in mediation and negotiations.

During the visit, the Bicomunal Technical Committee on Gender Equality (one of a number of Technical Committees established as part of the peace process), met with Monica and Avila and they have agreed to re-examine the programme of work of the committee and its activities.

The UN Secretary General’s report to the Security Council on Cyprus on 15 October referred to the visit: <http://undocs.org/S/2018/919>

From 22 to 26 September, co-founders of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition participated in a series of events on the island to share experiences and discuss the role of women’s engagement in the Good Friday Agreement and within peace processes more broadly, and to share lessons that could strengthen the inclusion of women’s perspectives in the peace process in Cyprus. The programme was hosted and facilitated by the PRIO Cyprus Centre and the Embassy of Ireland in Cyprus, in partnership with UNFICYP and my good offices mission, and involved public events in different locations across the island, as well as more focused meetings with women activists, politicians, academics, university students and gender practitioners. During the meetings, there was discussion on issues ranging from outreach and community mobilization, as well as how to support the inclusion of civil society more broadly in the peace process. Importantly, following several months of inactivity, several members of the Technical Committee on Gender Equality met on 23 September during a meeting held in the context of the visit of the co-founders of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition. Among other issues, methods to draw a gender perspective most effectively into any future resumption of talks were discussed.

THEMES THAT EMERGED

- Civil society engagement and women's participation are vital to building an inclusive and sustainable process, and a sustainable peace
- In particular when there is a vacuum in Track 1, there is an even greater need for civil society to mobilise and prepare for the possible resumption of the process
- Contact between communities is a good thing and should be supported, irrespective of what is happening in the political process
- It is necessary to communicate to the public what will happen "The Day After" a comprehensive settlement approved through simultaneous referendums, to ensure public support for a settlement, and also to sensitise the public to the need for compromise
- Civil society should be subversive and creative in ensuring its voice is heard
- Importance of the themes in UN Security Council, Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security as a basis for engagement
- Importance of long-term community-based work with different women to allow for the fostering of trust and relationships
- Importance of shared education in fostering a "culture of peace" and the need to work with teachers and students, and the links between language and religion
- Sharing of personal stories can increase awareness of other perspectives and allow healing to take place
- Importance of identifying progressive men within communities and recruiting them as champions of women's causes
- Mobilisation in NI was premised on the principle: "nothing about us without us for us"

Quote from participant

"I felt very emotional watching the ["Wave Goodbye to the Dinosaurs"] film and seeing women who have experienced violence turning it into hope. We should show our determination and love our country. We are a small island but we are not speaking each other's language. This is not a problem. We can learn each other's language. But we are now moving away from each other. I wish women entered politics."

KEY MESSAGES

- The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was formed from the broader women's movement and redefined the term "politics" to not only include the election process, but also actions by women and civil society. In this way civil society and grassroots action can complement representative democracy
- The NIWC came together as a coalition – rather than as a political party – based on three principles: human rights, equality, and inclusion, and to focus on issues and positions that political parties had ignored
- The NIWC was structured to work in a divided society - with two leaders drawn from the different communities
- In a women's coalition, there need not be agreement on all issues. Using a common language and based on shared interests, e.g. peace, women will identify what constitute priority issues for them and progressively work on them
- Initiatives in NI have engaged in women's history as oral history, which has helped to build relationships based on shared issues like sexual violence, social justice, and equality. This approach recognises the importance of memory and is a means to engage women
- Listening to the needs of women is vital – in particular, attention should be given to women facing different kinds of adversities, including poverty and domestic violence. In the case of the NIWC, it was of crucial importance to the movement as it gradually created spaces for dialogue and collaborative work, and gained access to different areas of the different communities by combining identity work with collaborative, common-issue action
- The NIWC adopted a strategy of holding meetings with women and asking them about their everyday concerns, to engage them around the issues of health, education, youth and community, social justice, criminal justice, and positive peace
- There is need for both bicomunal and intra-community action in relation to women's and gender issues, and that any action that incorporates and promotes a gender perspective will have a positive impact on peace
- The inclusion of a gender perspective in these processes by both men and women political actors is as important as the presence of women in peace processes
- Women's representation in the Northern Ireland negotiations was achieved based on multilevel networking and communication action at the local, national, and international/ European level
- It is vital that events and initiatives are inclusive of and open to young people

FOLLOW-UP EVENTS AND ACTIONS

- Publication of this report to coincide with International Women's Day in March 2019, as a platform for a further gathering of all of the participants in the visit with presentations by the Co-Chairs of the Bicommunal Technical Committee on Gender Equality
- Screening of "Wave Goodbye to Dinosaurs" in June 2019 as part of the UN Country Team's Women's Film Days initiative
- Further screenings of "Wave Goodbye to Dinosaurs" for smaller, grassroots gatherings to be facilitated by the Embassy of Ireland
- Bicommunal Technical Committee on Gender Equality to develop projects, including an oral history project, a bicommunal initiative with women entrepreneurs and a climate change/environment project, and apply for funding from the European Commission funding facility in support of the Technical Committees
- Support development of an island-wide women's movement
- Follow-up meeting with the women from political parties in cooperation with the Slovak Embassy's bicommunal initiative on political parties
- Further complementary initiatives by resident Embassies for women's groups e.g. Women's Walk, a local initiative supported by the Embassy of the Netherlands and UNFICYP
- Link to work of the Cyprus Dialogue Forum on gender issues
- Creation of a network of women's coalitions and working groups on UNSCR 1325
- Events to take place in cities other than Nicosia, and in villages and rural areas on both sides of the island to enhance outreach
- Support the publication of a gender-sensitive socio-economic impact assessment as called for in UNSCR 2453 (2019)

UN Security Council Resolution 2453 (2019): "...Stresses the importance of the full and effective participation of civil society and women in particular at all stages of the peace process and expects their involvement in the development and implementation of post-conflict strategies for sustainable peace, including by revitalising the Gender Committee and calls upon the UN to take forward, within existing resources, the Secretary-General's proposal to conduct a gender-sensitive socio-economic impact assessment and to share its outcome with both communities;

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