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CYPRUS WOMEN BICOMMUNAL COALITION

STUDY VISIT TO NORTH IRELAND AND IRELAND

1-5 SEPTEMBER 2024

The Cyprus Women Bicomunal Coalition (CWBC) was launched last April with a threefold main goal included in their Manifesto: “(i) the urgent solution to the Cyprus problem, based on the agreed UN framework and the existing body of work; ii) the full, equal and meaningful participation of women at the negotiating table at all levels of the negotiation process and the inclusion of a gender perspective in the negotiations and (iii) strengthening the role of women in peacebuilding by promoting a culture of peace and reconciliation”.

The CWBC has been strongly inspired by the remarkable struggle of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, a cross-community coalition of Northern Ireland women, who were determined to have a seat at the negotiating table and played a constructive and instrumental role at the peace negotiations that led to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998. CWBC study visit to Belfast and Dublin is funded by the European Union under the EU Aid Programme for the Turkish Cypriot community through the Grow Civic program. Grow Civic, an integral program of Civic Space, offers in-kind support to grassroots CSOs and local activists. It aims at contributing to build in the Turkish Cypriot community, a stronger civil society, which supports democratic changes and confidence-building measures.

The financial support of the European Union gave the opportunity to visit Belfast and Dublin for a lessons learning trip and to meet with some of the then protagonists of the peace process, as well as current politicians and officials who work for the implementation of the agreement, was a unique experience for the CWBC and an eye opener for the successes achieved, as well as the challenges still being encountered in a post conflict and peace-building phase.

The Good Friday Agreement was a political settlement which ended decades of conflict in Northern Ireland, in which all participants committed to addressing their differences through exclusively political means. This commitment to peace and democracy is the foundation of Northern Ireland’s transformation, based on power-sharing, equality and the explicit recognition of the right of all Northern Ireland’s people to choose their own identity as British, Irish or both. The Agreement also establishes the exclusive right of the people of Northern Ireland to democratically choose whether to remain in a union with Britain or to choose to become part of a united Ireland. The Irish and British Governments are the co-guarantors of the Agreement and work to jointly advance the implementation of the Agreement, recognizing the democratic rights of the people of the Northern Ireland

The trip started with a meeting in Belfast on Monday, 2nd of September, at the Northern Ireland Office, the office of the British Government in Northern Ireland. Senior officials explained in detail the key purposes of the Northern Ireland Office and its contribution towards making

politics and the Good Friday Agreement work, by working alongside the Northern Ireland Executive and helping ensure a stronger society by supporting initiatives designed to build better community relations and a genuinely shared future. They also answered many questions from CWBC members and engaged in a fruitful discussion during the nearly two hour long meeting.

On Tuesday, 3rd of September, the CWBC was in Dublin starting the day with one of the most important highlights of the visit, a meeting with the former Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland at the time of the negotiations and one of the signatories of the Good Friday Agreement, Mr. Bertie Ahern. His leadership, vision and determination were instrumental in bringing all the parties together to conclude the Good Friday Agreement. As Mr. Ahern said at the time “On Good Friday 1998 negotiations concluded in Belfast with the Multi-Party Agreement. The Agreement represented the product of perhaps the most intensive negotiations ever involving Nationalists and Unionists, Loyalists and Republicans. On 22 May, it received the overwhelming endorsement of the people of Ireland in referendums, North and South. It replaces the settlement of 1920 and 1921 and as such, it is truly historic”. The CWBC were impressed by his ongoing commitment to peace and support for the full implementation of the agreement. He was extremely generous with his time and he engaged in a very constructive discussion with the members of the CWBC who were eager to learn from the Northern Ireland experience and what it takes to succeed, especially true leadership and inclusiveness. He stressed the need for bravery on the part of political leaders in reaching compromises in order to reach a solution.

The next meeting in Dublin was in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs with Secretary General, Joe Hackett, and other senior officials of the Department responsible for Northern Ireland, as well as Cyprus and the south-east Europe region. The discussion was fruitful and informative and the opportunity was provided to the CWBC members to explain the main aims and principles governing the Coalition and how strongly it was inspired by the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition in consolidating its determination to make a difference in changing the nearly all-men negotiation process in Cyprus to become more inclusive, more transparent and result oriented, after 60 years of failed efforts to reach a settlement. We are thankful for the support of the Irish Government which was so clearly expressed in the social media post following the meeting: “Women have played a vital role in the peace process on the island of Ireland. Initiatives such as the Cyprus Women Bicomunal Coalition can have a transformative impact in Cyprus”.

On the evening of Tuesday, 3rd of September, the CWBC members were back in Belfast where they had the unique opportunity to meet with another of the protagonists of the Good Friday Agreement and co-founder of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, Bronagh Hinds, at a dinner generously hosted by Laurence Simms, Irish Joint Secretary of the British-Irish Secretariat. Bronagh is a living example and inspiration for women determined to bring peace to conflict areas, build peace and reconciliation and a better future for the future generations! Bronagh, who was the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition director of elections for the peace talks and its chief advisor during the Good Friday Agreement negotiations, shared her experiences with the CWBC members. She listened extensively members of the CWBC express their concerns and frustration over sixty years of failed efforts to conclude a peace agreement in Cyprus and was kind enough to provide advice and useful recommendations.

The last day of the visit, Wednesday the 4th of September, was devoted to meetings at the Northern Ireland Executive Office and the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly, as well as a

visit to two important centers, the WAVE Trauma Center and the Shankill Shared Women's Center.

At the Northern Ireland Executive Office, which is headed by four dynamic women, First Minister and deputy First Minister and the two Junior Ministers, the CWBC members met with the latter, Aisling Reilly and Pam Cameron representing both communities. The overall aim of the Executive Office is to work within the power-sharing coalition under the Good Friday Agreement and contribute to and oversee the co-ordination of the policies and programmes of the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver a peaceful, fair, equal and prosperous society. CWBC members were briefed on the responsibilities of the Executive Office and how it functions vis-à-vis its support for the power-sharing Executive and liaison with the Assembly, the North-South Ministerial Council, British-Irish Council, Civic Forum and UK Departments.

At the Northern Ireland Assembly, the CWBC members met with the Chairperson of the Women's Caucus, Claire Sugden MLA, as well as Kellie Armstrong MLA and member of the Caucus, which is a united, cross-party forum made up of all current women MLAs. The aim of the Caucus is to address the under-representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland. The discussion was informative in understanding the status of women in Northern Ireland politics and their ongoing struggle for women's advancement in all fields.

The visit to the Widows Against Violence for Empowerment - WAVE Trauma Center was a very moving experience and an eyeopener on the continued need to heal the traumas, the psychological as well as the physical injuries, long after a conflict ends with the signing of agreements. We listened to Paul Gallagher, a Trauma Education Officer and Sandra Peake, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), who leads the work with the 'Disappeared' on behalf of WAVE, who made us realize the remarkable work that WAVE Trauma Center is performing in the cases of the Disappeared Persons, as well as for the services provided to individuals impacted by the Troubles/Conflict. Services are provided on a cross community, fully inclusive basis to all people within the Greater Belfast area, and other centers around Northern Ireland. All members of the CWBC were moved by what Paul Gallagher, who is himself an innocent victim of violence, had to say about the trauma he suffered and the need for specific trauma-informed therapies to be provided to victims.

The Shankill Shared Women's Center is a true haven for women from all community backgrounds in Northern Ireland. The CWBC met with Betty Carlisle, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Center, which is recently housed in a fantastic building, a purpose-built £7.8 million shared women's center, which will provide a broad range of services and support for women and their families. Warm congratulations for these visionary and committed women whose purpose is to provide training, health awareness, childcare, various women's activities and women's empowerment.

The members of the CWBC had a private tour to the so-called "Peace Walls/Peace Lines", a series of separation barriers in Northern Ireland, the majority in Belfast, that were built to separate and protect predominantly Irish republican or nationalist Catholic neighborhoods from predominantly British loyalist or unionist Protestant neighborhoods. Memorials are built on both sides of the Peace Walls, to pay tribute to the over 3,500 people who lost their lives during The Troubles/Conflict. CWBC members realized, most for the first time, that such walls existed and continue to separate communities well over 26 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. They also realized what an important component of an agreement safety and security is for all parties involved in the conflict and that mutually acceptable solutions must be

found as part of an agreement in order not to jeopardize the implementation of the agreement. CWBC members signed the Peace Wall, leaving messages of hope for permanent peace and a time when such structures will be brought down, allowing people to safely circulate in all parts of Northern Ireland.

The CWBC is grateful to the European Commission for its staunch support in financing these lessons learning trip with the Aid Programme for the Turkish Cypriot community through the Civic Space. This has definitely helped to increase the determination of its members to continue with more passion and perseverance in their efforts to realize their goals.

The CWBC also extend their sincere thanks to the Cyprus Peace and Dialogue Center (CPDC) and the Center for Gender Equality and History (KIIF) for their invaluable support in making this trip possible. They also appreciate the Embassy of Ireland for its continued support, as well as the participation of an observer from the UN OSASG-Cyprus. Finally, CWBC is grateful to Sheena Leeson, who has served as the facilitator of the Coalition since its founding, for her invaluable support in organizing the visit and accompanying the delegation on the visit.



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