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CWBC STUDY VISIT TO NORTH IRELAND AND IRELAND

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The Cyprus Women's Bicomunal Coalition (CWBC) participated in a working visit to Belfast and Dublin last week, organized with the financial assistance of the European Union under the EU Aid Programme for the Turkish Cypriot community through the Grow Civic program. During this visit, they had the opportunity to hear from some of the protagonists of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, as well as meet with politicians and officials who are now actively working to implement the agreement. This was an important experience for CWBC members, not only to see what has been achieved, but also to see the challenges still faced in the post-conflict and peacebuilding phase and the struggle to sustain the agreement.

In Dublin, CWBC members met with Bertie Ahern, former Prime Minister of Ireland and one of the signatories of the Good Friday Agreement, where they heard in detail about his experience from the Northern Ireland negotiations and asked questions focuses on leadership and inclusiveness as necessary prerequisites to reach an agreement. In the meeting, Ahern emphasized the need for political leaders to be courageous in reaching a compromise in order to reach a solution.

In Dublin, the CWBC also met with the Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs of Ireland, Joe Hackett and other senior officials. In a productive and informative meeting, CWBC members explained the main aims and principles of the CWBC and how strongly they were inspired by the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, in consolidating their determination to make a difference in transforming the almost all-male negotiating process in Cyprus, into a more inclusive, transparent and results-oriented one, after 60 years of failed attempts to reach a settlement.

In Belfast, CWBC also had the opportunity to meet with Bronagh Hinds, another powerful protagonist of the Good Friday Agreement and co-founder of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. Bronagh, who was the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition's election director for the peace talks and its chief advisor for the negotiations on the Good Friday Agreement, shared her experiences with CWBC members. She also listened extensively to their concerns and frustration at the failure of sixty years of efforts to achieve a peace agreement in Cyprus and offered advice.

In Belfast, the CWBC had the opportunity to meet with senior officials from the Northern Ireland Office, the British Government's office in Northern Ireland, hear in detail about the office's key purposes and its contribution towards the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement by working with the Northern

Ireland Executive to build better community relations and a genuinely shared future.

The CWBC also met with Aisling Reilly and Pam Cameron who serve as Junior Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive Office and were briefed on the responsibilities of the Executive Office and its support to the power-sharing Executive.

CWBC members also met in the Northern Ireland Assembly with Claire Sugden MLA and Kellie Armstrong MLA, Chair and Member of the Women's Caucus, a cross-party forum made up of all current female MPs, whose purpose is to address the under-representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland. The visit was informative in understanding the status of women in Northern Ireland politics and the ongoing struggle for women's advancement in all spheres.

In concluding their official program in Belfast, CWBC visited two important centers, the WAVE Trauma Center and the Shankill Joint Women's Center.

At the WAVE (Widows Against Violence for Empowerment) Trauma Centre, they met with Paul Gallagher, Trauma Education Officer, and Sandra Peake, Head of the Centre, to learn about the services WAVE provides to individuals affected by the Troubles/Conflict and its work on the disappeared.

The Shankill Women's Center is a center for women from all walks of life in Northern Ireland. The CWBC met with Betty Carlisle, the Centre's CEO and was briefed on the services provided by the Center in relation to education, health awareness, childcare, various women's activities and women's empowerment.

CWBC members also had a private tour of the "Peace Walls", a series of separation barriers in Northern Ireland, mostly in Belfast, built to separate and protect Catholic neighborhoods from Protestant neighborhoods. These walls still exist as a symbol of how safety and security for all parties involved in the conflict is an essential component of an agreement. By signing the Peace Wall, CWBC members left messages of hope for lasting peace and a time when such structures can be demolished and people can move safely throughout Northern Ireland.

The CWBC was founded last April with three key objectives: "(i) the urgent solution to the Cyprus problem on the basis of the agreed UN framework and 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 was greatly inspired by the extraordinary struggle of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, a coalition of Northern Irish women who were determined to be at the negotiating table and played a constructive and effective role in the

peace negotiations that led to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement on April 10, 1998.



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