

# Families of lesbian and gay individuals heard in new film

The representation of gays and lesbians in Turkey is problematic, transsexual individuals even more so. A recent movie, 'Benim Çocuğum' (My Child), funded through crowd sourcing, might be a big step toward changing that



ANKARA

It has been quite the month in the media for the visibility of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) communities in Turkey, even more for the families of LGBT individuals. While gay men (and to some degree, lesbians) are more and more becoming the darlings of pop culture (albeit laced with stereotypes), the representation of and news coverage regarding transsexual women continue under an awful light.

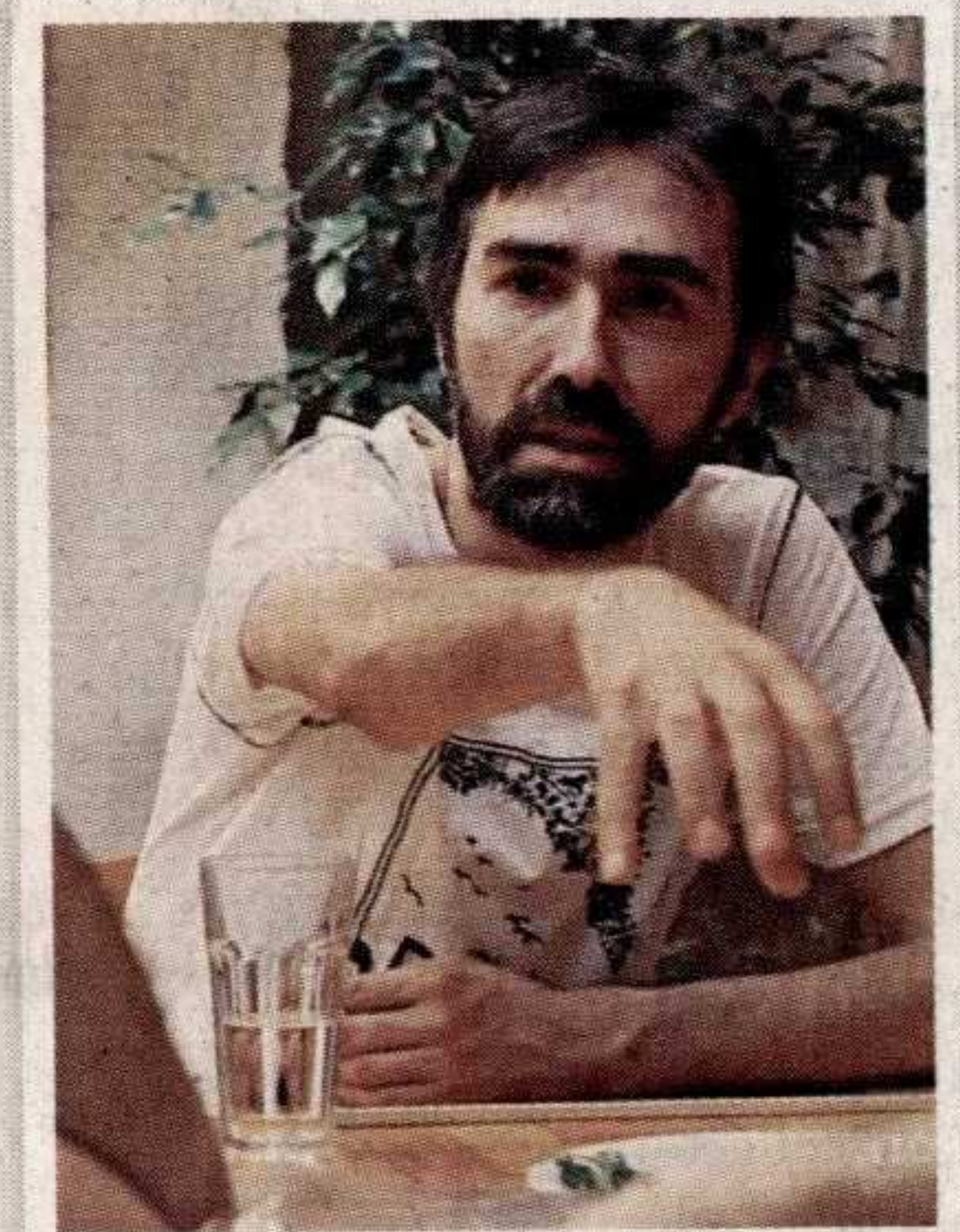
Transsexual women are the actors of freak shows, as far as the mass media is concerned. As for transsexual men, they are just invisible. Unless, of course, you're the sex-changing son of Cher. This all took a different turn in the last couple of weeks, as new openings for LGBT individuals, openings that never before found a place in the mass media, blossomed as full-fledged, real stories.

## A few sentences shed light on the film

A group of transsexual men – one a public figure – their mothers and fathers, as well as the families of certain other LGBT individuals, took center stage in a flow of coverage in the mass, alternative and social media.

Those following the LGBT civil initiatives and groups in Turkey were already aware of a new documentary in the making for the last two years, a production that hoped to raise money through the crowd-sourcing web site, Indiegogo. The name of the film was "Benim Çocuğum" (My Child), and a few sentences were enough to shed light on the film. "Parents of LGBT's in Turkey speak out! What happens when your child comes out to you? A feature documentary about five mothers and two fathers of LGBT's in Istanbul."

"My Child" finally completed its journey from a hopeful pre-production to a moving documentary that made its debut in the recent If Istanbul International Independent Film Festival. The documentary, directed by filmmaker and academic Can Candan, puts the families of LGBT individuals in the spotlight for the first time. The first half of the movie is a collection of intimate interviews with parents, as their quivering voices alternate in recalling the journeys their children and they themselves



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had to go through.

One mother remembers how she had to hide her pain when buying the son she had given birth to her first bra. Another recalls the moment she finally acknowledged that her son's best friend was actually his boyfriend. One father tells of the struggles he had to endure throughout his daughter's journey from chronic depression and anorexia to finally coming out.

"Coming out" is a term hovering throughout the documentary. But more than the children's coming out, it is the parents' coming out that take up most of the screen time. As one mother told the audience in the film's Ankara premiere last week, "There is the process of families' coming out just as there is the children's. We are the seven people who are ready to be advocates, who are ready to be visible."

These seven parents, whose troubled faces light up the screen, are, as one mother puts it, "the tip of the iceberg," the iceberg that is LİSTAG, Families of LGBT in Istanbul, a civil initiative that took off in 2008. Their stories are of fear, despair, denial, shame, acceptance and – to these lucky families – rebirth.

The families in LİSTAG take one of their major missions as guiding families in their harrowing and very difficult journey in a homophobic and transphobic society. The second half of the film features scenes from their monthly dinner, the new and the old coming together, and later their preparations for

the upcoming Gay Pride events in Istanbul. One mother talks of how, after a period of nonchalance, it dawned on her that she had become a true activist.

## The world listens to mothers

These parents, in fact, redefine activism through unconditional love and acceptance. One scene shows the LİSTAG group watching themselves in Parliament talking about their children to TV cameras, some great feat after the public statement made by Selma Aliye Kavaf, the Turkish State Minister Responsible for Women and Family, in which she said, "I believe homosexuality is a biological disorder, a disease. It needs to be treated."

The hard work the group has been doing, along with the push the film has been giving, seems to have begun to pay off. Among the audience in the Ankara premiere were three parliamentarians from the main opposition party, Republican People's Party (CHP). One of them, Binnaz Toprak, made her feelings heard after the screening: "You are the bravest people in the world. This

film should be screened in parliament, too. I promise to do my best for this to happen."

The film had helped LİSTAG reach out to families throughout Turkey. "When 'My Child' was screened recently in the southeastern city of Diyarbakır as part of If Istanbul," one of the parents said, "the screening venue was filled with families." Coinciding with the film's surprisingly positive coverage in the media was another bomb, when Ayşe Arman, the

doyenne of groundbreaking interviews, last week interviewed for daily Hürriyet an actor who underwent gender reassignment surgery from female to male.

The heart-to-heart interview generally received positive feedback, with the expected backlash, some news stories embellishing the reaction to the interview with supposed death threats and implications that Rüzgar Erkoçlar's family was far from supportive. Erkoçlar's mother was quick

to answer, showcasing a reaction very much like the parents in "My Child." "Rüzgar did not do anything bad. We have always supported him. However, some of the news has damaged us a lot," told Sema Erkoçlar of Hürriyet. "Rüzgar never received death threats. But some people are making that up." When mothers speak up, the world listens. These courageous mothers know their power and are not afraid to use it for a better world. ● HDN