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Building an inclusive Georgia

By Anna Kamushadze

"If people want to know how homosexuals feel living in Georgia, they can imagine what Georgians feel like living in Russia these days. Being a victim of homophobia or xenophobia isn't such a different experience," says the chairperson of the Inclusive Foundation NGO.

"No matter whether the minority is called 'Georgian', or 'homosexual' or 'Muslim', the discrimination they face as a minority is very similar," he continues.

The Inclusive Foundation supports the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community in Georgia and is the first organization in Georgia which assists sexual minorities by offering free consultations with psychologists, doctors and lawyers. They were officially registered as an NGO in August 2006.

The NGO's donor organizations include COC Netherlands, the Dutch Lesbian Gay Bisexual (LGB) Organisation and the European region of the International Lesbian Gay Association (ILGA). The Foundation is also part of the Council of Europe's NGO group and member of the working group "All different, all equal" campaign.

The organisation promotes the establishment of a society in Georgia where sexual orientation and gender self-expression would not be not grounds for discrimination, as "a democratic, coherent and strong society is inconceivable without the full integration of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, as well as any other social group". The goal of the Inclusive Foundation is to promote the integration of the LGBT community in Georgian society, through education and civil action.

Inclusive's chairperson doesn't blame Georgians for having low levels of tolerance, he points out homosexuality in Georgia was illegal until 2000, when it was decriminalised by the government as part of their Council of Europe membership commitments.

Since 2000, the attitude of the Georgian media towards homosexuality has been far from positive. In a study the organization conducted in February 2006 called *Representation of Homosexuality/homosexuals in Georgian Media*, the issue of media coverage of homosexuality is addressed.

The report states that before 2000, articles would only touch upon issues such as "minor sexual disorders", "abortion", "HIV/AIDS" and "prostitution". The term "homosexual" was first seen in Georgian print media in the con-

text of discussing HIV/AIDS and prostitution, thereby just strengthening stereotypical notions of sexual minorities in Georgian society.

The study says the situation changed rapidly starting in 2000, when homosexuality "became a politicised issue". Newspaper headlines proclaimed, "Georgia is ruled by homosexuals" (*Rezonansi*, # 107) and "Despite the fact that 'blue people' [the slang term for gay men] do not procreate, they continue to increase in numbers"

sexual orientation, of course. In my opinion it is big misery when so many young people change their sexual orientation. If we do not take proper care of this, we might be facing a terrible catastrophe tomorrow."

Inclusive Foundation publishes a quarterly magazine *Me* (I) to try to counter the negative representation of homosexuality in society. The articles touch on issues ranging from political issues such as human rights protection of sex-

which is oriented towards democracy and human rights' protection...From this point of view, we think the government must be a leader in resolving problems. It must assist people in becoming more informed and educated in this area."

Inclusive Foundation members also organize various trainings and seminars to empower their volunteers. In addition, they hold seminars for researchers, students, journalists, human rights NGOs and

packed all of his luggage and put it in the doorway. He began living on his own with not a tetri to his name. Now he works and has a good salary, but still he never tells anyone about his orientation.

"I have a friend that I treat as my girlfriend. I pay attention to her, kiss her, pet her and by doing this lead people to think I am heterosexual," confides Goga.

In a study the Foundation conducted in conjunction with their partners in January 2006, 120 members of the Georgian LGBT community were anonymously surveyed. When asked if they were out to their family, 86.7 percent answered "no" and when they were asked if they were out to their friends, only 33.61 percent said that they were.

"We are not witches, we are normal people who have the same feelings as others," says 34-year-old Nika. Nika identifies with the male gender though he lives in the body of a female. He says he remembers as a five-year-old, choosing to wear trousers rather than the dress his mother would lay out for him.

At the age of seventeen, Nika identified with boys and hung out on the street corner with his friends. One day, he brought home his girlfriend and said it was his wife. His family was very confused about their "daughter" bringing home a girl as his "wife" and after a week Nika's lover left due to family pressure. They then forced their "daughter" to get married to a man.

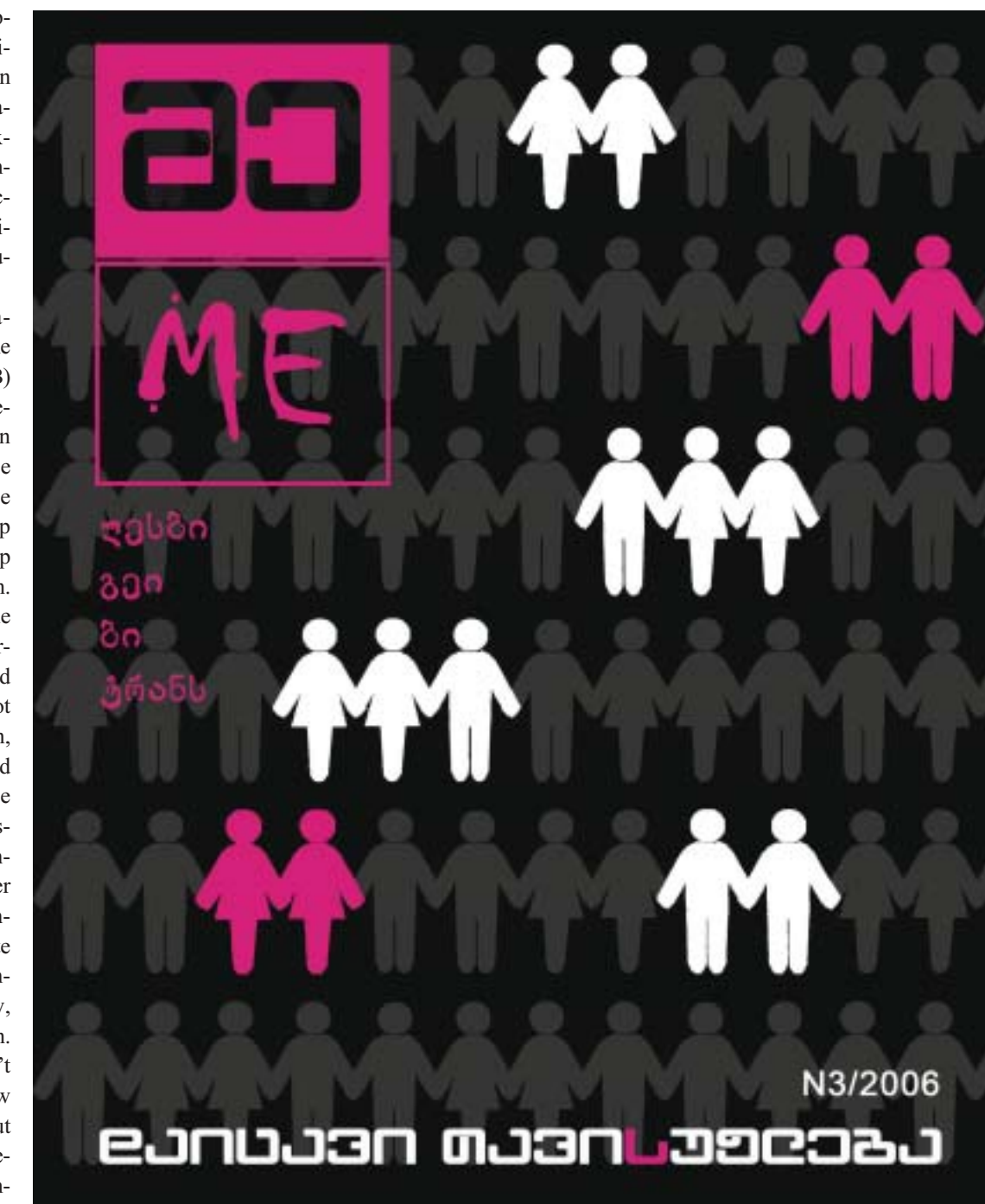
One of his close male friends loved him and so something was arranged so that he did not realize what was going on until he woke up in bed with him the next morning. His friend assured him that it was necessary for both of them at that moment and so he went along with it.

He lived with his spouse while maintaining his now 17-year-long relationship with his girlfriend on the side. After two years, he says he couldn't live that way any longer so he divorced his husband and went to be with his girlfriend.

He says the most difficult moment of his life was when he had to explain to his daughter of 15 that he did not have an ordinary sexual orientation. But he says his daughter was amazingly understanding, and now she often accompanies him when he goes to meetings at the Inclusive Foundation.

"You live only once in this world and you mustn't live for others. You kill yourself by doing that," says Nika.

Contact the Inclusive Foundation at www.inclusive-foundation.org



Me is a quarterly magazine published by the Inclusive Foundation

ual minorities in other countries, to art-related articles reviewing movies dealing with issues related to homosexuality (such as *Philadelphia*) to social issues such as myths about homosexuality in society (i.e. if you participate in a homosexual act even once, your orientation will change).

Commissioner of the Council of Europe for Human Rights Thomas Hammarberg, during his visit to Georgia at the end of February of this year, felt the need to comment on homophobia. "Homophobia is not a part of a modern society

other institutions working on LGBT issues in Georgia.

Members of the organization say it's not easing being gay in Georgia. Although homosexuality has been legal in Georgia since 2000, there is still discrimination. It's difficult for a conservative, traditional country to accept a "non-traditional" orientation.

Goga, an only child, says he hid his feelings for a long time. One day, he left his house in a rush and accidentally left his computer on. His mother discovered everything and before he returned, she had

(*Akhali 7 Dghe* # 17); "Enemies of the people: KGB agents and ... Pederasts" (*Georgian Times*, # 9).

In an issue of *Akhali Taoba* (#307), Elene Tevdovadze Chair of Parliamentary Committee for Human Rights and Civil Integration and one of the very persons in charge of defending citizens' human rights is quoted as saying, "...our problems today, are unemployment, drug dependency, following the criminal tradition and changing orientation." When asked what she means by "changing orientation" she says, "I mean