

ELEVEN YEARS IN PRISON FOR SUPPORTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

WRITE
FOR
RIGHTS

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



Manahel
al-Otaibi,
Saudi
Arabia

Human Rights
Education
Activity





WRITE FOR RIGHTS

WRITING LETTERS CHANGES LIVES

When just a handful of people unite behind someone, the results can be amazing.

More than 20 years ago, a small group of activists in Poland ran a 24-hour letter-writing marathon. In the years that followed, the idea spread. Today, Write for Rights is the world's biggest human rights event.

From 2,326 letters in 2001 to nearly 6 million letters, tweets, petition signatures and other actions in 2023, people the world over have used the power of their words to unite behind the idea that geography is no barrier to solidarity. In 2023 alone, more than 1.4 million people were engaged through human rights education activities. Together, our actions have helped transform the lives of more than 100 people over the years, by releasing activists from detention, securing justice for those whose rights have been abused and protecting people who advocate for change.

This year's campaign once again includes people from around the world. They are connected because their human rights have been violated simply for who they are or because they exercised their rights. Together, we can fight for them to receive justice. Through Write for Rights, each of the individuals will receive personalized messages of solidarity from thousands of people across the globe. The awareness that their situations are gaining public attention offers reassurance to them and their families that they are not forgotten. And, by writing directly to the authorities to demand that they end the injustice, we can create a more just and equal world.

Individuals and groups featured in the campaign in previous years report the difference that these actions make, and often describe the strength they derive from knowing that so many people care about them.

Often, there is a noticeable change in the treatment of these individuals and others in a similar situation. Charges may be dropped and people released from detention. People are treated more humanely, and new laws or regulations addressing the injustice are introduced.

“From the bottom of my heart, this campaign has kept me alive, it's what has stopped them from killing me because they know that you are there.”

Jani Silva, environmental defender, 2021

BEFORE YOU START

This **human rights education activity** can take place in a variety of online or offline settings, such as a school classroom, a community group, a family or an activist group. As a facilitator, you can adapt the activity to best suit the context and group you are working with. For example, you may want to consider what knowledge the group already has about the issues discussed, the size of your group and how to best organize the activity to allow for active participation, the physical setting of your activity, delivering it in-person or online, and any limitations. When participants want to take action for an individual or group, discuss whether it is safe for them to do so.

The activities are all based on **participatory learning methods** in which learners are not merely presented with information; they explore, discuss, analyse and question issues relating to the individuals' stories. This methodology allows participants to:

DEVELOP key competencies and skills

FORM their own opinions, raise questions and gain a deeper understanding of the issues presented

TAKE CONTROL of their learning, and shape discussions according to their interests, abilities and concerns

HAVE THE SPACE required for them to engage emotionally and develop their own attitudes.



Letter writing with friends in Czechia for Write for Rights 2023.

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Read about the people we're fighting for: [amnesty.org/writeforrights](https://www.amnesty.org/writeforrights)

Contact the Amnesty team in your country: [amnesty.org/countries](https://www.amnesty.org/countries)

Tweet your support to @Amnesty using the hashtag #W4R24

If you are not familiar with participatory learning methods, look at Amnesty International's **Facilitation Manual** before you start: [amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/)

Amnesty International offers online human rights education courses, including a short course about human rights defenders which introduces the **Write for Rights campaign**: academy.amnesty.org/learn

YOUR WORDS ARE POWERFUL

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER ACQUITTED

Rita Karasartova is a human rights defender and an expert in civic governance. For more than a decade she has dedicated her life to providing independent legal advice, helping people whose rights had been violated by a corrupt and unreliable legal system. Alongside 26 others, Rita was arrested for opposing a new border agreement giving control of a freshwater reservoir to Uzbekistan. Charged with attempting to “violently overthrow the government”, which carries a maximum sentence of 15 years’ imprisonment, Rita and at least 21 other defendants were acquitted on 14 June 2024.

“I would like to express my huge, huge gratitude... Your timely actions – these letters, petitions, signatures, and the huge number of letters that went to the court, that went to the prosecutor’s office – it was all very powerful. In fact, it was very empowering to us all... Of course, the acquittal was totally unexpected. I don’t even know how to process it in my head. We had been playing with all sorts of scenarios, different outcomes in our heads, but we didn’t think we would all be acquitted!... I thank you all.”

Rita Karasartova
from Kyrgyzstan



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“I feel so relieved, and I thank you for the amazing Write for Rights campaign. I am forever indebted. It is like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Reading all the letters and cards made me feel so loved and appreciated.”

Cecillia Chimhiri from Zimbabwe



OPPOSITION ACTIVISTS FREED

Opposition activists Cecillia Chimhiri, Joana Mamombe and Netsai Marova were abducted, tortured and imprisoned after attending a protest in Zimbabwe. They were charged with “communicating falsehoods” and “obstructing the course of justice”. Netsai fled Zimbabwe following the attack. After being featured in Write for Rights 2022, Cecillia and Joana were acquitted by the High Court.



© Amnesty International Togo



Amnesty supporters in the Netherlands (far left) and Togo (left) at events for Write For Rights 2023.

ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are the basic freedoms and protections that belong to every single one of us. They are based on principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect – regardless of age, nationality, gender, race, beliefs and personal orientations.

Your rights are about being treated fairly and treating others fairly, and having the ability to make choices about your own life. These basic human rights are universal – they belong to all of us; everybody in the world. They are inalienable – they cannot be taken away from us. And they are indivisible and interdependent – they are all of equal importance and are interrelated.

Since the atrocities committed during World War II, international human rights instruments, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have provided a solid framework for national, regional and international legislation designed to improve lives around the world. Human rights can be seen as laws for governments. They create obligations for governments and state officials to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of those within their jurisdiction and also abroad.

Human rights are not luxuries to be met only when practicalities allow.



Write for Rights event in Benin in 2023.



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THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR)

The UDHR was drawn up by the newly formed United Nations in the years immediately following World War II. Since its adoption on 10 December 1948, it has formed the backbone of the international human rights system. Every country in the world has agreed to be bound by the general principles expressed within the 30 articles of this document.

The UDHR itself is, as its name suggests, a declaration. It is a declaration of intent by every government around the world to abide by certain standards in the treatment of individual human beings. Human rights have become part of international law: since the adoption of the UDHR, numerous other binding laws and agreements have been drawn up based on its principles. It is these laws and agreements which provide the basis for organizations like Amnesty International to call on governments to refrain from the type of behaviour or treatment that the people highlighted in our Write for Rights cases have experienced.

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

 <p>Civil rights and liberties Right to life, freedom from torture and slavery, right to non-discrimination.</p>	<p>Article 1 Freedom and equality in dignity and rights</p> <p>Article 2 Non-discrimination</p> <p>Article 3 Right to life, liberty and security of person</p> <p>Article 4 Freedom from slavery</p> <p>Article 5 Freedom from torture</p>
 <p>Legal rights Right to be presumed innocent, right to a fair trial, right to be free from arbitrary arrest or detention.</p>	<p>Article 6 All are protected by the law</p> <p>Article 7 All are equal before the law</p> <p>Article 8 A remedy when rights have been violated</p> <p>Article 9 No unjust detention, imprisonment or exile</p> <p>Article 10 Right to a fair trial</p> <p>Article 11 Innocent until proven guilty</p> <p>Article 14 Right to go to another country and ask for protection</p>
 <p>Social rights Right to education, to found and maintain a family, to recreation, to health care.</p>	<p>Article 12 Privacy and the right to home and family life</p> <p>Article 13 Freedom to live and travel freely within state borders</p> <p>Article 16 Right to marry and start a family</p> <p>Article 24 Right to rest and leisure</p> <p>Article 26 Right to education, including free primary education</p>
 <p>Economic rights Right to property, to work, to housing, to a pension, to an adequate standard of living.</p>	<p>Article 15 Right to a nationality</p> <p>Article 17 Right to own property and possessions</p> <p>Article 22 Right to social security</p> <p>Article 23 Right to work for a fair wage and to join a trade union</p> <p>Article 25 Right to a standard of living adequate for your health and well-being</p>
 <p>Political rights Right to participate in the government of the country, right to vote, right to peaceful assembly, freedoms of expression, belief and religion.</p>	<p>Article 18 Freedom of belief (including religious belief)</p> <p>Article 19 Freedom of expression and the right to spread information</p> <p>Article 20 Freedom to join associations and meet with others in a peaceful way</p> <p>Article 21 Right to take part in the government of your country</p>
 <p>Cultural rights, solidarity rights Right to participate in the cultural life of the community.</p>	<p>Article 27 Right to share in your community's cultural life</p> <p>Article 28 Right to an international order where all these rights can be fully realized</p> <p>Article 29 Responsibility to respect the rights of others</p> <p>Article 30 No taking away any of these rights!</p>

ACTIVITY

THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

KEY CONCEPTS

- Freedom of expression
- Gender-based discrimination
- Unfair trial
- Women's rights defenders

ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

Participants will learn about the right to freedom of expression and how it intersects with gender-based discrimination and woman's rights activism through the story of Manahel al-Otaibi, a women's rights defender in Saudi Arabia. Participants will analyse human rights violations and take action in support of Manahel al-Otaibi.

AGE: 12+

TIME NEEDED

60 minutes – you may want additional time for the **Take Action** section.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will:

- **understand** the right to freedom of expression and how it relates to choosing one's clothing.
- **learn** about gender-based discrimination and its impact on women's rights.
- **learn** about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign.
- **write** letters in support of and showing solidarity with Manahel al-Otaibi.

PREPARATION

- Print the handouts and copies of the simplified UDHR for each participant/group.
- Read the background information on page 10 and Manahel's story on page 11.

MORE INFORMATION

Learn more about human rights including the right to freedom of expression at the Amnesty Academy: www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/online-courses/

MATERIALS

- **Handout: Matching cards** (page 9)
- **Handout: Manahel's story** (page 11)
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** simplified version (page 5)
- **Paper, pens and envelopes** (if sending letters)
- Optional: Video of Manahel al-Otaibi from www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos
- Optional: "Write for Rights: Take action" video from www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos
- Optional: Template letters from www.amnesty.org/writeforrights/

1. EXPRESS YOURSELF!

Distribute paper and pens. Ask participants to draw their favourite items to wear – it can be clothing, shoes, accessories or any type of apparel. It can be something they already wear, or items they would like to wear to express themselves and their identity.

Let participants share their drawings with a partner and discuss:

- **What item(s) did you draw and why?**
- **How does (or would) wearing this make you feel?**
- **How much do other people influence what you wear?**

After a few minutes, invite participants to stick their drawings on the wall. Briefly discuss in plenary:

- **How much does society expect people to adhere to specific dress codes based on gender?**

As a facilitator, pick some of the most common items. Draw a big red cross on a large piece of paper, stick it on the wall or board and group these items under it. Announce that they are now forbidden items. Ask the group:

- **How do you feel, knowing that I am specifically forbidding these items?**
- **Is it fair for me to decide what is and what is not acceptable?**
- **Would you still wear them? What if wearing these items would risk imprisonment?**
- **Are there differences in what people are expected to wear based on certain traditional, historical, religious and/or cultural attitudes in our community? Why or why not?**

Share reflections on societal expectations and norms regarding dress. Discuss the implications of gender-based discrimination in dress codes.



2. MANAHEL AL-OTAIBI'S STORY

Introduce Manahel to the participants. Explain that Manahel al-Otaibi is a fitness instructor and a brave, outspoken advocate for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. In November 2022, she was arrested for tweeting about women's rights and posting photos of herself at a shopping mall to Snapchat. In the photos, she was not wearing the traditional long-sleeved loose robe known as an *abaya*. Manahel has been sentenced to 11 years in prison.

Read Manahel al-Otaibi's story (page 11) aloud or distribute copies and read it together. Collect a few initial reactions to her story from participants. Encourage them to reflect on the previous discussions from step one.

 10 MINUTES

3. MATCHING RIGHTS

Split the participants into small groups. Hand out a set of the matching cards (page 9) to each of the groups. Explain that they will match what happened to Manahel to the relevant human right from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Bring participants back together to share their answers.

To finalize the activity, ask:

- What needs to happen for Manahel to receive justice?

 15 MINUTES

If this is the first time that participants are introduced to the UDHR, you should focus on building a shared understanding of what it is first, using the information starting on page 4.

4. TAKE ACTION

Explain about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign. Explain that Amnesty International is encouraging people to demand the release of Manahel al-Otaibi. You can give examples from last year's campaign (page 3) demonstrating how successful writing letters and taking other actions can be, or watch the "Write for Rights: Take action" video from www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos

If there isn't enough time for participants to take action within the time allowed, encourage them to organize how to do so afterwards or divide the actions among the groups. Encourage them to be creative.

 15 MINUTES

Show participants the video of Manahel al-Otaibi which can be found here: www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos (available in English).



WRITE A LETTER

Encourage participants to write to Saudi Arabia's Minister of Justice using the contact information on the right.

- Tell the minister what shocks you about the case of Manahel.
- Tell them why you think it is important that governments respect and uphold the right to freedom of expression.
- Tell the minister to **immediately and unconditionally release Manahel al-Otaibi and drop all charges against her.**

Minister of Justice

PO box 7775
11472
Riyadh
Saudi Arabia

Email: minister-office@moj.gov.sa
and 1950@moj.gov.sa

X: @MojKsa

Hashtags: #FreeManahel #W4R24

Salutation: Your Excellency

SHOW SOLIDARITY

Show Manahel she is not alone. Send her your message of solidarity and hope. Draw dumbbells or the “we can do it” pose which Manahel replicated in the photo below. Be creative!

Post your drawing to your social media, tagging Manahel when you do. Don't forget to follow her on X! Then, send your message to the address to the right.

Manahel al-Otaibi

c/o Saudi Arabia Team
Amnesty International
1 Easton Street
London WC1X 0DW
United Kingdom

X: @ManahelAl_otibi

Hashtags: #FreeManahel #W4R24



Manahel replicating the “we can do it” pose.

HANDOUT**MATCHING CARDS****UDHR ARTICLE 1****FREEDOM AND
EQUALITY IN
DIGNITY**

Under the laws of her country, Manahel is treated as a criminal and “terrorist” rather than being respected as a human being with equal rights.

**UDHR ARTICLE 2****NON-
DISCRIMINATION**

Manahel is being imprisoned for not wearing women’s traditional clothing. These practices do not apply to men.

**UDHR ARTICLE 3****RIGHT TO LIFE,
LIBERTY AND
SECURITY OF
PERSON**

Manahel’s arbitrary arrest and imprisonment without just cause violate her right to live freely and securely.

**UDHR ARTICLE 5****RIGHT TO BE
FREE FROM
TORTURE AND
DEGRADING
TREATMENT**

Manahel said she was beaten by a fellow prisoner, held in solitary confinement, and left with a broken leg without medical treatment.

**UDHR ARTICLE 9****PROTECTION
FROM ARBITRARY
ARREST AND
DETENTION**

Manahel has been imprisoned without just cause and she has not received a fair trial.

**UDHR ARTICLE 18****FREEDOM
OF BELIEF,
INCLUDING
RELIGIOUS
BELIEF**

Manahel has been denied her right to choose what she believes in and to not wear traditional dress.

**UDHR ARTICLE 19****FREEDOM OF
EXPRESSION
AND RIGHT
TO SPREAD
INFORMATION**

Manahel was initially charged with violating the Anti-Cyber Crime Law due to her tweets supporting women’s rights.

**UDHR ARTICLE 25****RIGHT TO HEALTH**

Manahel was denied medical treatment in prison for her broken leg.



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Everyone has the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. This also includes the right not to hold any religious belief and the right to choose whether to manifest one's religion or belief through wearing specific symbols or dress.

Frequently, dress codes are underpinned by religious interpretations, cultural norms and stereotypical gender roles.

Governments have an obligation to respect, protect and ensure the rights of every individual to personal autonomy and to express their beliefs or personal convictions or identity. Governments should allow every person to make that choice free of discrimination or coercion. This means that governments must not impose compulsory requirements that women dress or do not dress in a certain way, and they must protect women from being coerced to dress in specific ways by family members, the community, religious groups or leaders, or anyone else. This applies whether women are being compelled to wear a specific item like a headscarf or are being prohibited by law from wearing it.

The case of Manahel al-Otaibi highlights these issues starkly. Manahel chose to express herself by advocating for women's rights and freedoms and choosing not to wear the traditional *abaya*. For this, and for her women's rights activism, she was arrested and sentenced to 11 years in prison for terrorism-related offences. Her treatment by the Saudi authorities constitutes a violation of her human rights. She is being punished for exercising her freedom of expression and personal autonomy in choosing her attire.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN SAUDI ARABIA

Since 2018, Saudi authorities have arbitrarily detained women's rights activists who campaigned for the end of the male guardianship system and for the right of women to drive in Saudi Arabia. Women's rights activists reported facing sexual harassment, torture and other ill-treatment during interrogation. Those released from detention are under travel bans and face other restrictions on their human rights including the right to freedom of expression.

In March 2022, Saudi Arabia's first Family Law was issued. The law perpetuates the male guardianship system and entrenches discrimination against women in most aspects of family life including marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance.

Saudi Arabia's enforcement of dress codes for women, such as wearing of the *abaya*, violates the human rights of women and girls. In 2019, as part of a drive to promote tourism, the authorities announced a relaxation of dress codes for women visiting the country from overseas. However, female citizens and residents face legal uncertainty for dressing freely in public. Compelling women to wear specific attire through threats, social pressure, legal penalties or imprisonment infringes upon their dignity and autonomy. This enforcement can amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, which is prohibited under international law. When such acts cause severe mental or physical pain or suffering, they can constitute torture.

Manahel al-Otaibi's case underscores the importance of protecting the rights to freedom of expression and personal autonomy, ensuring that women human rights defenders are not prosecuted, and that no one is subjected to coercion or discrimination in their choice of attire.

Saudi authorities have adopted a zero-tolerance policy for any criticism. They have closed all human rights groups, wiping out independent civil society in the country. People are being sentenced to harsh prison terms solely for peacefully exercising their human rights. Some have even been sentenced to death.

“*Saudi Arabia is like a kingdom for men, only and exclusively, a regime built solely for their own benefit.*”

Fawzia al-Otaibi, sister of Manahel al-Otaibi



MANAHEL'S STORY

In recent years, Saudi Arabia's authorities have claimed that they are advancing women's rights. Manahel al-Otaibi believed these promises and felt freer to express her views and wear what she liked. Now, facing 11 years behind bars, these promises are utterly hollow.

Before her arrest, Manahel was a fitness instructor and a brave and outspoken advocate for women's rights, using social media to call for greater freedoms for women in her country. Manahel was arrested on 16 November 2022. She was charged with violating the Anti-Cyber Crime Law for her tweets supporting women's rights and her posts on Snapchat which included photos of Manahel not wearing an *abaya*, a traditional robe, in public.

Her case was referred to the country's counterterrorism court, the Specialized Criminal Court, notorious for its grossly unfair trials and harsh sentences. On 9 January 2024, Manahel was given an 11-year prison sentence for "terrorist offences" for her online expression. The hearing was held in secret and the results were only revealed weeks later.

In November 2023, Manahel told her family that she had been beaten by a fellow prisoner. As a result, she was cut off from the outside world, prevented from communicating with anyone. In April 2024, Manahel was able to call her family for the first time in months. Sounding distressed, she told them she was being held in solitary confinement and had again been brutally beaten, leaving her with a broken leg and no medical treatment.



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From the top: Manahel al-Otaibi; A view of Saudi Arabia.

ABOUT AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We investigate and expose the facts, whenever and wherever abuses happen. We lobby governments as well as other powerful groups such as companies, making sure they keep their promises and respect international law. By telling the powerful stories of the people we work with, we mobilize millions of supporters around the world to campaign for change and to stand in the defence of activists on the frontline. We support people to claim their rights through education and training.

Our work protects and empowers people – from abolishing the death penalty to advancing sexual and reproductive rights, and from combating discrimination to defending refugees' and migrants' rights. We help to bring torturers to justice, change oppressive laws, and free people who have been jailed just for voicing their opinion. We speak out for anyone and everyone whose freedom or dignity are under threat.

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