

RITA KARASARTOVA

FACING 15 YEARS IN PRISON

FOR PEACEFULLY PROTESTING

WRITE
FOR
RIGHTS

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



Kyrgyzstan





WRITE FOR RIGHTS

MORE THAN 20 YEARS OF WRITING

LETTERS THAT CHANGE LIVES

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

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

From 2,326 letters in 2001 to more than 5.3 million letters, tweets, petition signatures and other actions in 2022, people the world over have used the power of their words to unite behind the idea that geography is no barrier to solidarity. Together, these individuals have helped transform the lives of more than 100 people over the years, freeing them from torture, harassment or unjust imprisonment.

Once again, this year's campaign features people from around the world, all connected because their human rights have been violated. Some by their governments, others by the police, or even big corporations. All because of who they are or because they simply exercised their rights. Together, we can fight for their rights. Through Write for Rights, they 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 they take immediate action to remedy injustice we can create a more just and equal world.

Alongside the letter-writing actions, Amnesty International speaks to those who have the power to change these people's situations, such as politicians in their countries. Write for Rights also gives visibility to these injustices through public events, and garners international attention on social media.

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 of other people and groups in a similar situation, by the country's authorities. 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 on a case, 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 cases. 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 event in Antwerp, Belgium, for Write for Rights 2022.

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 #W4R23

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

ACTIVISTS ACQUITTED

After leading an anti-government protest in May 2020, Cecillia Chimbir, Joanah Mamombe and Netsai Marova were arrested, taken to a police station, forced into an unmarked car, and driven out of the city of Harare, Zimbabwe. They were subsequently beaten, tortured and left on the side of the road. While hospitalized, the women were charged with criminal offences relating to the protest. Later, they were also charged with communicating falsehoods and obstructing the course of justice, for speaking about their ordeal. Netsai fled Zimbabwe following the attack. After featuring in Write for Rights 2022, where more than half a million actions were taken on their behalf, Cecillia and Joanah were acquitted by the High Court on 4 July 2023.



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FREED FROM DEATH ROW

Magai Matiop Ngong from South Sudan was just a schoolboy when he was sentenced to death on 14 November 2017 for murder. Magai recounted how he told the judge the death was an accident and that he was only 15 years old at the time. Yet Magai was tried for capital murder without any access to a lawyer. More than 700,000 actions were taken for Magai during Write for Rights 2019. In March 2022 the High Court agreed that, because he had been a child at the time, he should be released. Magai is now safely out of the country and determined more than ever to help people like him.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER FREED

Bernardo Caal Xol, a teacher and father, worked tirelessly to defend communities affected by hydroelectric projects on the Cahabón river, in northern Guatemala. In November 2018 he was sentenced to more than seven years in prison on bogus charges aimed at preventing his human rights work. During Write for Rights 2021, more than half a million actions were taken for Bernardo and, in March 2022, he was released from prison.



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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.



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Launch of Write for Rights 2022 in Lomé, Togo.



© UN Photo

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 that they will 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 on the basis of 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

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

KEY CONCEPTS

- Women human rights defenders
- Freedom of expression
- Freedom of peaceful assembly

ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

Participants will learn how the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are fundamental to the work of human rights defenders, through the real story of Rita Karasartova who was arrested and charged for speaking up against the government in Kyrgyzstan. As part of the activity, participants are encouraged to write a letter to call for Rita's immediate and unconditional release and to show solidarity with her.

AGE: 14+

TIME NEEDED

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

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will:

- **understand** the concepts of freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and how they are linked to the work of human rights defenders.
- be able to **describe** the consequences of violations of freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly.
- **learn** about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign.
- **write** letters in support of and showing solidarity with Rita Karasartova.

MATERIALS

- **Handout: Words of Courage** (page 9)
- **Handout: Rita's story** (page 11)
- **Background information** (page 10)
- **Paper, pens, art materials and envelopes** (if sending letters)
- Optional: Video of Rita Karasartova from [amnesty.org/w4r-videos](https://www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos)
- Optional: Template letters from [amnesty.org/writeforrights/](https://www.amnesty.org/writeforrights/)

PREPARATION

- Print the handouts for each participant/pair.
- Read the background information on page 10 and Rita's story on page 11.

MORE INFORMATION

- For more information on freedom of expression: [amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/freedom-of-expression/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/freedom-of-expression/)
- 20-minute course on Write for Rights: academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/145/write-for-rights-a-short-guide

1. SPEAK UP!



Ask participants to think about a particular situation in the past in which someone they knew was treated unfairly. Help them to organize their thoughts using these questions:

- **Has anyone ever been unjust to you or to others around you? Did you speak up?**
- **What were the consequences for you when you spoke up, positive or negative?**
- **How did it affect your willingness to speak up in the future?**

Split participants into pairs and give each pair a quote and reflection prompt from the handout **Words of Courage** (page 9). Give them a couple of minutes to share their thoughts with each other. If there is enough time, do another round and have participants switch partners and quotes.

Bring the participants back together. Read each quote out loud and ask participants who discussed that quote to share some reflections. At the end, reveal that all these quotes are from the same person. Ask participants:

- **What did you learn about the author of these quotes? What do you think is their story?**
- **Which of the quotes resonate strongly with you? Why?**

Continue by explaining that we all have a right to freedom of expression, meaning that you have the right to say what you think, share information and demand a better world. You also

have the right to agree or disagree with those in power, and to express these opinions in peaceful protests. Explore the concept of freedom of expression using the following questions. If there's not enough time, focus on just one question for plenary discussion:

- **Why don't we always speak up when others face injustice, or have their human rights violated? What stops us?**
- **Should there be any limit to what people can say when standing up for themselves or others?**
- **Does it make a difference who you are opposing – why or why not?**
- **What do you think about standing up against injustice caused by the government?**

You can use the **background information** on freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly (page 10) to help guide the conversation.

2. PUNISHED FOR SPEAKING UP AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT:

RITA'S STORY

Explain to the group that being arrested for defending human rights and expressing criticism of the government does happen in some countries around the world, and that we are going to explore one particular case in Kyrgyzstan.

Distribute copies of **Rita's story** (page 11) to participants and read the following paragraph out loud:

“Rita Karasartova was born in the village of Grigorievka on lake Issyk-Kul, world-renowned for its natural beauty. She graduated from the Kyrgyz National University with a PhD degree in economics. After graduation, she stayed on to teach. In addition, Rita travelled a lot around Kyrgyzstan, conducting educational programmes on financial and economic literacy for local government deputies. Rita is known and respected throughout the country.”

Ask different participants to read one paragraph each from Rita's story. Conclude by saying that all the quotes from the previous exercise – **Words of Courage** – are from Rita.

Divide the participants into small groups and ask them to discuss Rita's story using the following questions:

- **What shocks or surprises you about Rita's story?**
- **How does her story relate to the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly?**
- **What happens when governments detain and prosecute people in this way?**
- **What should happen for Rita to receive justice?**

Bring the participants back together. Ask the groups to share some of their findings and discussions.

Explain that the authorities sometimes punish and prosecute people, movements or organizations in order to stop them from defending or exercising their human rights. Then use the **background information** on shrinking civic space in Kyrgyzstan (page 10) to explain how the Kyrgyzstan government prosecutes activists and human rights defenders for their work, violating the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Sometimes, people and organizations are accused of “preparing mass disorder” or even charged with “attempting to violently overthrow the government” for simply exercising their human rights or carrying out their legitimate actions in defence of human rights. Point out that it is important that the government addresses this situation, by publicly recognizing the important work of human rights defenders and respecting their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The government should also make sure that public officials don't make statements that discredit human rights defenders or delegitimize their work, and that they do not misuse the law to silence them.





If there is enough time left, reflect on the following question with the participants:

- **What inspires you about Rita's story?**

Take answers from a few people.

3. TAKE ACTION



Explain about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign. Explain that Amnesty International is encouraging people to demand justice for Rita Karasartova. You can give examples from last year's campaign (page 3) demonstrating how successful writing letters and taking other actions can be, or watch this one-minute video from Moses Akatugba, who was freed from death row thanks to the actions of people during Write for Rights 2014: youtu.be/8cU6EPY5r_c (available in English only).

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.

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

WRITE A LETTER

Encourage participants to write to the authorities in Kyrgyzstan using the contact information on the right.

- Tell the General Prosecutor something about yourself to make this a personal letter.
- Tell them what shocks you about the case of Rita Karasartova.
- Tell them why you think it is important that governments uphold the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.
- Tell them to take all steps needed to **ensure that all charges against Rita Karasartova are dropped and the authorities allow her to carry out her legitimate human rights activities without fear of retaliation.**

General Prosecutor

A. Toktonaliev Street, 139
Bishkek
720040
Kyrgyz Republic

Salutation: Dear General Prosecutor

Email: statement@prokuror.kg

Facebook: facebook.com/prokuraturakg

Instagram: instagram.com/genprokuratura_kr/

Hashtag: #W4R23

SHOW SOLIDARITY

Show Rita Karasartova that you believe in her. Send her your message of solidarity and hope. Be creative! Then post your message to the address to the right.

Some tips:

- Rita is fond of sewing the traditional Kyrgyz quilted jackets known as *chapans* with beautiful traditional patterns. Draw pictures with elements of traditional designs or clothing from your country.
- You can also send photos or postcards featuring famous landmarks and landscapes from your country.
- You can mention Rita's children: her daughter Kasiet (23 years old) and her son Alibek (15 years old). You can write to them too!

Rita speaks Kyrgyz and Russian, she is also studying English.

Here is an example message to include:

Ритага Боштондук (Kyrgyz) – **Свободу Рите** (Russian) – **Freedom to Rita** (English)

Rita Karasartova

c/o Civic Initiatives
Abdrakhmanova 204
Office 14
Bishkek
710040
Kyrgyz Republic

Email: freedomrita@protonmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/rita.karasartova

Hashtag: #W4R23


HANDOUT

WORDS OF COURAGE

ACKNOWLEDGING THE TRUTH (QUOTE 1):

“Our words are common sense, we speak so that people know: ‘The king is naked!’”


Think about a situation in your life or in the world where you see a truth that others might not be acknowledging. How does it make you feel? What can you do to help others see this truth?



DREAMS OVER FEAR (QUOTE 2):

“What drives a person? Dreams or fear? If we have a dream, we can overcome fear.”


What are your dreams? Do you let fear stop you from pursuing them? How can you use your dreams to overcome your fears?



THE POWER OF VOICE (QUOTE 3):

“The government wants to shut everyone up, but that’s impossible!”


Think about a time when you felt silenced or unheard. How did you overcome that? How can you ensure your voice is heard in the future?



PERSONAL CHANGE (QUOTE 4):

“Changes start with each of us.”


What changes do you want to see in your life or in the world? Have you ever initiated a change that you wanted to see?



THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTION (QUOTE 5):

“Not being able to contact loved ones is torture.”

Think about the importance of connection in your life. Who are the loved ones you need to reach out to? What if you were no longer able to speak to them?



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR), ARTICLE 19

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Article 19 of the UDHR protects your right to hold your own opinions and to express them freely, without government interference. This includes the right to express views through public protests or through written materials, media broadcasts, the internet and works of art. We need a free flow of ideas in order to ensure that different opinions are taken into account and different ideas are aired. Limiting the right to freedom of expression undermines transparency and accountability and makes the fight for human rights even more difficult. Freedom of expression is important not just to society as a whole, but also to the individual. Our opinions and thoughts are a fundamental part of what makes us human and stopping people from expressing these is equivalent to cutting off a part of their personality!

The right to freedom of expression is not an unlimited right. Sometimes, governments have a duty to protect other people’s rights or certain public interests which requires some expression to be prohibited or restricted. But the circumstances in which the authorities can restrict the right to freedom of expression are very narrow and must be considered as exceptional rather than the norm.

The right to freedom of expression is closely linked to the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, which is the right of people to come together in a public place for a common expressive purpose, such as for meetings, strikes, processions, rallies and sit-ins. The right to peaceful assembly means that someone can gather together with others peacefully without fear of being arrested or harassed by the police. In fact, the authorities have a positive duty to facilitate peaceful assemblies, so the police may be required to take special measures to ensure the safety of both the people assembling and the general public.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

are people who, individually or collectively, take peaceful action to defend, protect or promote human rights at the local, national or international level. Anyone can be a human rights defender as long as they do not use or advocate violence.

SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE IN KYRGYZSTAN

Over the past five years, freedom of expression has been increasingly restricted in Kyrgyzstan, particularly for human rights defenders. The authorities have repeatedly violated the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and prosecuted those who tried to exercise it. Since March 2022 a series of court decisions have progressively limited where peaceful gatherings can be held by banning meetings outside some government buildings, embassies and popular public spaces. Initially, the restrictions were justified as temporary and necessary “to prevent and suppress possible mass riots on inter-ethnic basis” in the context of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. They were later extended and applied to any public actions and gatherings, but not to rallies organized by the government. Blanket application of legal restrictions – when certain laws or restrictions are applied uniformly without considering individual situations or circumstances, such as banning all demonstrations in certain places – goes against international human rights standards.

RITA'S STORY

Kyrgyzstan

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Rita Karasartova loves spending time with her children, practising yoga and sewing *chapan*s, the traditional quilted jackets worn by people in Kyrgyzstan. But in October 2022, Rita's life was turned upside down. She was arrested and spent months detained in a cramped cell, denied access to healthcare and unable to see or speak to her family. Now she is under house arrest and a strict curfew.

Rita is a human rights defender and an expert in civic governance. For over a decade she dedicated her life to providing independent legal advice, helping people whose rights had been violated by a corrupt and unreliable legal system. She leads the non-governmental Institute for Public Analysis and is a member of the United Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan, fighting against poverty and injustice.

Alongside 26 other people, Rita was arrested for opposing a new border agreement that gave control of a freshwater reservoir to neighbouring Uzbekistan. The group called for people to peacefully demonstrate against the agreement, demanding transparency from the government. Like others, Rita feared Uzbekistan would restrict or prohibit access to water, a scarce resource in the region where loss of access could have devastating consequences.

Rita and the others were initially detained for organizing "mass disorder", and she was charged with attempting to "violently overthrow the government", which carries a maximum sentence of 15 years' imprisonment.



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Top: Rita, wearing the traditional quilted jacket worn by people in Kyrgyzstan, the *chapan*.

Bottom: The Kempir-abad (Andizhan) reservoir, on the border of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.



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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