

THAPELO MOHAPI

AND THE AB AHLALI BASEMJONDOLO MOVEMENT

THREATENED FOR DEFENDING

HIS COMMUNITY

South Africa

WRITE
FOR
RIGHTS

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



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.



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

THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE HOUSING

KEY CONCEPTS

- Economic, social and cultural rights
- Right to housing and access to land
- Right to life
- Human rights defenders

ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

Participants will learn about the concept of access to adequate housing as a fundamental human right and the struggles faced by human rights defenders through the real story of Thapelo Mohapi and his community in South Africa. As part of the activity, participants are encouraged to write a letter to the authorities to demand justice and to show solidarity with Thapelo Mohapi.

AGE: 14+

TIME NEEDED

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

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will:

- **explore** the concept of the right to adequate housing and identify its core elements.
- **understand** the connection between housing and other human rights.
- **identify** the role and importance of human rights defenders in advocating for housing rights.
- **learn** about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign.
- **write** letters in support of and showing solidarity with Thapelo Mohapi.

MATERIALS

- **Handout: Defending the Right to Housing** (page 9)
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) simplified version** (page 5)
- **Art supplies – markers, coloured pencils, paper etc.**
- **Paper, pens and envelopes** (if sending letters)
- Optional: Video of Thapelo 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 copies of the handout on page 9 and the simplified UDHR on page 5 for each participant/group.
- Read the background information on page 10 and Thapelo's story on page 11.

MORE INFORMATION

- Website of Abahlali (AbM): [abahlali.org/](https://www.abahlali.org/)
- Amnesty International South Africa's press statement on human rights defenders: [amnesty.org.za/government-continues-to-fail-on-creating-a-safe-environment-for-all/](https://www.amnesty.org.za/government-continues-to-fail-on-creating-a-safe-environment-for-all/) (available in English only).
- 20-minute course on Write for Rights: [academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/145/write-for-rights-a-short-guide](https://www.academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/145/write-for-rights-a-short-guide)
- More educational activities on housing as a human right: [amnesty.org/en/documents/act35/005/2012/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act35/005/2012/en/)

1. DESIGN YOUR IDEAL COMMUNITY STREET



Start by asking the participants: **What do you think it means that “access to adequate housing is a human right”?** Collect a few answers.

Divide the participants into small groups. Provide each group with some art supplies (paper, markers, coloured pencils, etc.). Tell participants that each group will create a community of their ideal homes. Ask each participant to draw their ideal home, and then have them put these homes together and collaboratively sketch or design a street for their new, small community. They should consider the layout of the street, the placement of the houses, and the shared community spaces. Encourage them to think about the needs of a diverse group of residents and how their design can accommodate these needs.

After about 10 minutes, bring participants back together and explain that everyone has the human right to adequate housing, which means housing that is affordable, habitable, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe. This includes living somewhere that aligns with and respects your cultural heritage, while also having access to necessary services like water and plumbing, healthcare, schools and job opportunities.

Ask participants to look again at their drawings and encourage them to think about what access to adequate housing means to them. Ask them to identify the elements in their design that align with the concept of housing being affordable, habitable, accessible, culturally

appropriate and safe. Then, if there is enough time, ask a few volunteers to present their designs, specifically focusing on what makes the housing in their designs 'adequate'.

Refer back to access to adequate housing being a human right, and ask participants:

- **What do you think it means in practice for housing to be affordable, habitable, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe?**
- **How would a lack of adequate housing affect other areas of someone's life, such as their health, education, family life and work?**
- **How many people in the world do you think are not living in adequate housing? How is this an issue in our community/country as well?**

Use the **background information** on access to adequate housing as a human right (page 10) to help guide the discussion. Close the discussion by stressing that, while the provision of adequate housing is a shared responsibility among many parties such as governments, the private sector, community organizations and individuals, governments have specific duties and responsibilities to protect people and ensure access to adequate housing. Governments have a vital role in setting policies, regulations and standards for housing. They may also provide funding, land or incentives to encourage affordable housing development. Among other responsibilities, governments should:

- Ensure that everyone has at least a minimum degree of security of tenure and protection against forced evictions;
- Protect people against abuse of the right to adequate housing by companies or other non-state actors;
- Review and modify rules and regulations about housing construction, planning and zoning to promote housing for all and make it easier for people living in poverty to build or maintain their homes.

2. THREATENED FOR DEFENDING COMMUNITIES:

THAPELO'S CASE

Introduce the case of Thapelo Mohapi and the Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) movement, using **Thapelo's story** on page 11. Read the case aloud to the participants or ask for volunteers to read it out loud. Then distribute copies of the **Handout: Defending the Right to Housing** (page 9) and the **simplified version of the UDHR** (page 5).

Give participants a few minutes to read through the handouts. Then, in plenary, facilitate a discussion around the following questions:

- **What shocks or surprises you about Thapelo's case?**
- **What are the challenges faced by the residents and the activists of eKhenana in their fight for access to adequate housing?**
- **Which human rights are being violated in this case?**
- **Why do you think Thapelo and the community are being attacked and threatened?**
- **What should the authorities do to protect and uphold the human rights of Thapelo and other members of AbM?**

Use the **background information** on access to adequate housing as a human right (page 10) to help guide the discussion.



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



3. TAKE ACTION

Explain about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign. Explain that Amnesty International is encouraging people to demand justice for Thapelo Mohapi and AbM. 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 Thapelo Mohapi which can be found here: amnesty.org/w4r-videos (available in English).

WRITE A LETTER

Encourage participants to write to the Minister of Police in South Africa using the contact information on the right.

- Tell the minister something about yourself to make this a personal letter.
- Tell them what shocks you about the attacks against AbM members.
- Tell them why you think it is important that governments ensure a safe and enabling environment in which human rights defenders and activists can do their work.
- Tell them to **conduct a thorough, impartial, independent, transparent and effective investigation into the harassment and killings of AbM members, bringing suspected perpetrators to justice in fair trials, and ensure an end to the attacks against AbM members.**
- Tell them to provide access to justice and effective remedies for victims.

Minister of Police

Private bag X463
Pretoria
0001
South Africa

Salutation: Dear Minister

Twitter / X: [@SAPoliceService](https://twitter.com/SAPoliceService)
[@LirandzuThemba](https://twitter.com/LirandzuThemba) (Police

Ministry spokesperson)

Facebook: facebook.com/SAPoliceService

Instagram: [@sapoliceservice_za](https://instagram.com/sapoliceservice_za)

Hashtags: #ProtectThapelo
#ProtectAbM #W4R23

SHOW SOLIDARITY

Show Thapelo Mohapi and AbM that you support them. Send your messages of friendship and hope, to encourage them to keep up their fight for their communities. Be creative! Post pictures of your letters or video messages to your social media. Then, mail your letters to the address to the right.

Some tips:

- Say which country you are from, to show Thapelo and AbM how far and wide they are supported.
- Thapelo likes soccer and jazz music, so you could mention these activities or draw relevant pictures in your letter.

Thapelo speaks isiZulu and English. Here are some example messages to include:

Simi nawe (isiZulu) – **We are with you** (English)

Isibindi sakho siyasikhuthaza (isiZulu) – **Your courage inspires us** (English)

Thapelo Mohapi and AbM

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South Africa

Twitter / X: [@abahlalibm](https://twitter.com/abahlalibm)

Facebook: facebook.com/abahlalibasemjondolo/

Instagram: [@abahlalibasemjondolo](https://instagram.com/abahlalibasemjondolo)

Hashtags: #ProtectThapelo
#ProtectAbM #W4R23

HANDOUT

DEFENDING THE RIGHT TO HOUSING

eKhenana commune is located in Cato Manor, a suburb of eThekweni in KwaZulu-Natal. It is located near middle-class suburbs and important sites of employment. Historically troubled by political unrest, racial tension and forced removals under apartheid, Cato Manor continues to be plagued with housing shortages, forced evictions, land contestation and poor service delivery. Yet Cato Manor is also well-known for its activism and resistance.

The majority of eKhenana's residents are economic migrants from rural areas of South Africa who have moved to eThekweni to seek a better life for themselves and their families. They cannot afford the high rental costs that come with living in the city and suburbs. Therefore, they often end up occupying land and building homes from tin. These homes have limited or no access to services such as water or sanitation.

Determined to improve lives in the community, members from the Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) movement in eKhenana have spoken out against cases of local government corruption and worked hard to improve life in their community. They have started a political school where residents share their knowledge and learn English. The school has a farm, communal kitchen and shop. In return, AbM members have faced threats, harassment and intimidation. They have been victims of attempted and actual murders, violence, harassment and damage to their homes. According to AbM, 25 of their members – 21 men and four women – have been killed since the movement's inception in 2005. In 2022 alone, three AbM members from the eKhenana branch – two men and one woman – were killed. Countless other AbM members have been attacked and their properties destroyed.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Human rights defenders like Thapelo Mohapi often face significant risks. In many countries the authorities are not doing enough to ensure the protection of human rights defenders, many of whom face ongoing threats and intimidation for their work. Human rights defenders risk their lives to protect the people of South Africa, campaigning against corruption, advocating for human rights and fighting to improve the lives of others. Yet they are treated with disdain or worse by the state, which does little or nothing to uphold their human rights or bring suspected perpetrators to justice.

Nevertheless, every challenge presents an opportunity for change. The tenacity and resilience of human rights defenders like Thapelo Mohapi have often ignited the spark of transformation, fostering unity and courage within their communities. Their commitment helps to bring the issues of housing and human rights into the global spotlight, instigating crucial discussions. Despite the hardships, human rights defenders inspire hope and remind us of the power of collective action in the face of adversity.

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.

© Andrew Suderman / AbM Facebook



Right: The eKhenana settlement in KwaZulu-Natal.

Far right: Thapelo Mohapi, general secretary of AbM.

© Private



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

ADEQUATE HOUSING AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for their health and well-being. This includes the human right to adequate housing. Article 25 of the UDHR says that we all have the right to enough food, clothing, housing and healthcare for ourselves and our families. Under international law, to be adequately housed means having secure tenure – freedom from the fear of being unlawfully forced out of your home or having your home or lands taken away. It includes living somewhere that aligns with and respects your cultural heritage, while also providing access to necessary services, schools and job opportunities.

Access to adequate housing also means that housing must be affordable, habitable, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe. More than 1.8 billion people worldwide live in informal settlements or inadequate housing with limited access to essential services such as water, sanitation and electricity and many live under the threat of forced eviction. A government census in 2021 revealed that more than one in 10 households across South Africa were living in informal settlements. In the midst of plenty, many people still go hungry, live in poor housing without essential services such as water and toilets and grow up without access to education. This is not just because of a lack of resources, but also because of negligence and discrimination. Governments worldwide are simply unwilling to do enough about it.

People living in poverty are often trapped because they are excluded from the rest of society, denied a voice and threatened with violence and insecurity. Many people living in slums or informal settlements are not protected from harassment such as forced evictions because their right to live there is not legally recognized.

FORCED EVICTIONS

Forced evictions are when people are removed from their homes and lands without advance notice, consultation and compensation. Forced evictions are illegal under any circumstances and violate the right to adequate housing. Often forced evictions are violent, destroy livelihoods and leave people homeless. South Africa's high levels of poverty and inequality, compounded by widespread unemployment and the lack of access to adequate services, has created the conditions for social, political and economic unrest. It is in this context that human rights defenders such as Thapelo Mohapi risk their lives to ensure people in South Africa have access to basic human rights, including adequate housing.

BEYOND SHELTER: SECURITY,

PEACE AND DIGNITY

The right to adequate housing is closely connected to other economic, social and cultural rights. Adequate housing means more than just having a roof over your head; it's about living in security, peace and dignity. It directly affects the realization of other rights such as the right to an adequate standard of living including social support and protection, being close to work opportunities (the right to work), having access to good healthcare, clean water, sanitation and food (the right to health), as well as being near schools (the right to education). The rights to enjoy cultural activities and to citizenship are also tied to housing rights. All these rights are linked together, so if one is ignored or violated, others may be affected as well. Ensuring the right to adequate housing is therefore pivotal in achieving comprehensive human rights protection and ensuring an adequate standard of living for all.

THAPELO'S STORY

South Africa

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Thapelo Mohapi loves listening to jazz and supporting his favourite football teams, the Mamelodi Sundowns and Manchester City. But right now he can't enjoy these things like he used to. Since 2021, he has been forced to live in hiding because of threats to his life.

As general secretary of Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), a vibrant and courageous grassroots movement, Thapelo has dedicated his life to fighting for the rights of people across South Africa, particularly in areas suffering economic hardship.

One such place is eKhenana, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Most residents are economic migrants from rural South Africa who have moved to seek a better life. They cannot afford the high costs of living in the area and often end up making homes from tin, with little to no access to water or sanitation. They also face police brutality, forced evictions and poor public services, among many other challenges.

Determined to improve lives in the community, AbM members in eKhenana have spoken out against cases of local government corruption and worked hard to improve life in their community by starting a school, farm, communal kitchen and shop. In return, they have been met not just with resistance but threats, harassment and intimidation from state officials who have incited violence against them. They have been victims of attempted and actual murders, violence, harassment and damage to their homes. In 2022 alone, three AbM members were killed in eKhenana.



Top: Members of AbM learning about the farm in eKhenana.

Centre: Members of AbM take part in a peaceful protest.

Bottom: An AbM meeting in 2022.

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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First published in 2023
by Amnesty International Ltd
Peter Benenson House,
1 Easton Street
London WC1X 0DW, UK

September 2023
Index: POL 32/7061/2023
Original language: English

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Cover photo: © Private

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