



**WRITE
FOR
RIGHTS**

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



METU PRIDE DEFENDERS, TURKEY

**PROSECUTED
FOR CELEBRATING
LGBTI RIGHTS**

HUMAN RIGHTS INTRODUCTION

WRITE FOR RIGHTS

Amnesty International's "Write for Rights" campaign takes place annually around 10 December, which is Human Rights Day (commemorating the day when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948). Write for Rights aims to bring about change to the lives of people or communities that have suffered or are at risk of human rights violations. Among the many actions that take place as part of Write for Rights, Amnesty raises cases of individuals, groups and communities with decision-makers who can change the situation, gives visibility to those cases by organizing public actions, and brings international attention through media and internet exposure.

A major part of the Write for Rights campaign consists of a letter-writing marathon and involves millions of people around the globe. As a result of the international call to action, decision-makers are bombarded with letters. This year's cases cover people imprisoned for defending their rights and expressing their opinions, LGBTI activists targeted

for who they are, peaceful protestors beaten and shot at and environmental defenders harassed and intimidated or other human rights violations. They will receive messages of solidarity from thousands of people in far-off corners of the globe. Those suffering the violations and their families know that their cases are being brought to public attention. They know that they are not forgotten.

The results of similar campaigns in previous years have been striking. Individuals affected by the violations report the difference that these letters make, they express their gratitude to those who have written, and they often describe the strength they derive from knowing that so many people are concerned about their case.

Often there is a noticeable change by officials towards these individuals: charges are dropped, treatment becomes less harsh, and laws or regulations addressing the problem are introduced.

Read about the people we're fighting for:
www.amnesty.org/writeforrights

Contact the Amnesty team in your country:
www.amnesty.org/countries

Tweet your support to @Amnesty using the hashtag #W4R20

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

BEFORE YOU START

This **human rights education activity** can take place in a variety of settings, such as a school classroom, a community group, a family group, an activist group, online or offline. As a facilitator, you can adapt the activity to best suit the needs and context of the 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 and any limitations. When participants take action on a case, discuss with them whether it is safe for them to do so – why or why not?

The activities are all based on participatory learning methods in which learners are not merely presented with information, they

explore, discuss, analyze and question issues relating to the cases. This methodology is very important for the wider learning objectives because participants will:

- **develop** key competences and skills
- **have the opportunity** to form their own opinions, raise questions, and gain a deeper understanding of the issues presented.
- **take control** of their learning, and shapes discussions according to their interests, abilities and concerns.
- **have the space** required for them to engage emotionally and develop their own attitudes



Students and school teachers in Taiwan organized letter writing events with Amnesty International for the Write for Rights campaign 2019.
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If you are not familiar with participatory learning methods, look at Amnesty International's **Facilitation Manual** before you start. This can be found at www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/

Amnesty International offers further human rights education courses on different human rights issues through **the Amnesty Academy**, including a short course about human rights defenders which introduces the **Write for Rights Campaign**:
<https://academy.amnesty.org/learn>

SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE 2019 CAMPAIGN

HOW YOUR WORDS HAVE CHANGED LIVES

JAIL SENTENCE REDUCED IN IRAN

In 2019, Yasaman Aryani was sentenced to 16 years in prison for handing out flowers to train passengers while unveiled. In February 2020, her sentence was substantially reduced, thanks in part to the more than 1.2 million messages written worldwide for her freedom. We won't stop until she's free.



“We are joining hands around the world to combat all the injustice.”

Crystal Swain of Grassy Narrows



HEALTHCARE WIN FOR GRASSY NARROWS, CANADA

For decades, the Grassy Narrows Indigenous community have been suffering the effects of mercury poisoning in one of Canada's worst health crises. The youth of Grassy Narrows have been particularly affected, and have been at the forefront of the fight for a healthy future for their community. *After years of delay, a \$19.5 million (CDN) agreement to build a care facility was finally signed on 2 April 2020 – a victory for the people of Grassy Narrows.*

DEATH SENTENCE REVOKED IN SOUTH SUDAN

Magai Matiop Ngong was only 15 when he was sentenced to death. But thanks to the amazing support of people like you, his death sentence was cancelled in July 2020. People around the world took an incredible 765,000 actions, including letters and tweets, calling for Magai's life to be spared – and it worked.

**“Thank you so much.
I have no words.
You have no idea
how my heart is filled
with happiness.”**

Magai Matiop Ngong



HUMAN RIGHTS INTRODUCTION

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 or state officials to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of those within their jurisdiction and also abroad.

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



Members of Amnesty International Togo joining in the Write for Rights campaign, 2019. Every year they mobilize people throughout the country to take part.

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HUMAN RIGHTS INTRODUCTION

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 1948, it has formed the backbone of the international human rights system. Every country in the world has agreed that they are 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.

HUMAN RIGHTS INTRODUCTION

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS



CIVIL RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES

Right to life, freedom from torture and slavery, right to non-discrimination.

Article 1 Freedom and equality in dignity and rights

Article 2 Non-discrimination

Article 3 Right to life, liberty and security of person

Article 4 Freedom from slavery

Article 5 Freedom from torture



LEGAL RIGHTS

Right to be presumed innocent, right to a fair trial, right to be free from arbitrary arrest or detention.

Article 6 All are protected by the law

Article 7 All are equal before the law

Article 8 A remedy when rights have been violated

Article 9 No unjust detention, imprisonment or exile

Article 10 Right to a fair trial

Article 11 Innocent until proven guilty

Article 14 Right to go to another country and ask for protection



SOCIAL RIGHTS

Right to education, to found and maintain a family, to recreation, to health care.

Article 12 Privacy and the right to home and family life

Article 13 Freedom to live and travel freely within state borders

Article 16 Right to marry and start a family

Article 24 Right to rest and leisure

Article 26 Right to education, including free primary education



ECONOMIC RIGHTS

Right to property, to work, to housing, to a pension, to an adequate standard of living.

Article 15 Right to a nationality

Article 17 Right to own property and possessions

Article 22 Right to social security

Article 23 Right to work for a fair wage and to join a trade union

Article 25 Right to a standard of living adequate for your health and well-being



POLITICAL RIGHTS

Right to participate in the government of the country, right to vote, right to peaceful assembly, freedoms of expression, belief and religion

Article 18 Freedom of belief (including religious belief)

Article 19 Freedom of expression and the right to spread information

Article 20 Freedom to join associations and meet with others in a peaceful way

Article 21 Right to take part in the government of your country



CULTURAL RIGHTS, SOLIDARITY RIGHTS

Right to participate in the cultural life of the community.

Article 27 Right to share in your community's cultural life

Article 28 Right to an international order where all these rights can be fully realized

Article 29 Responsibility to respect the rights of others

Article 30 No taking away any of these rights!

ACTIVITY

DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS

FOLLOW COVID-19 MEASURES

Be sure to comply with public health advice in your area during the Covid-19 Pandemic and conduct your activity ensuring safety and any physical distance measures in place.

If you are doing the activity online:

- **Choose** a platform that provides participation and interaction while being secure.
- **Adapt** the activity to allow for relevant reflections and debriefing (in small groups)
- **Provide** technical support for participants to allow for good participation.

In light of Covid-19 and the various digital spaces in which schools and other groups now have to come together to continue their normal activities, Amnesty is developing additional material to support the delivery of these activities online. Check the **Write for Rights** webpage www.amnesty.org/writeforrights

KEY CONCEPTS

- LGBTI rights
- Freedom of expression
- Right to peaceful assembly
- Discrimination
- Demonstrations
- Policing and excessive use of force
- Human rights defenders and activists

ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

Participants look at the right to peaceful assembly by considering a fictitious situation and then relating to a real one where people were subjected to police violence, detention and subsequent prosecution for participating in a Pride sit-in.

TIME NEEDED:

60 minutes

AGE: 14+

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Participants identify some of the human rights violations faced by LGBTI people in Turkey
- Participants build empathy for those whose right to peaceful assembly has been violated.
- Participants know about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign and prepare to take action in support of one of the cases.

PREPARATION AND RESOURCES

- A copy of the METU Pride Defenders Case card, page 15
- OPTIONAL – copies of the summary UDHR, page 5
- A copy of the quotes to read out or hand out, page 13
- A copy of the questions for small group work, page 8

1 CELEBRATIONS

 10 MINUTES

Welcome participants by explaining that they are going to be planning an important celebration. Ask them to choose for themselves an event they would like to plan (such as, a wedding, birthday, graduation, coming of age, a school or community event, a religious or cultural celebration). Participants should picture or imagine the scenario in their mind. You might want to ask them to close their eyes as you read the following out to them:

You have been asked to help plan an important celebration. Once you've chosen the celebration, think about all the things you would like to be present. Where will it be held? Who will be there? What will the ceremony, programme or agenda include? Will there be food and entertainment? Why is this event important to you? How do you feel when you think of everyone together celebrating?

Give the participants a couple of minutes to share their initial ideas of their celebration with someone else.

Ask participants to close their eyes again and continue by reading out the following, to imagine:

There has been some bad news and unfortunately the government has decided that all community and family celebrations are now banned in the country.

A recent high court decision established that there were no legal bases for the government to ban such celebrations, so you decide to go ahead with the planned event but change it to an informal gathering and inform all the guests or potential attendees accordingly.

During the preparations early on the day of the planned event, police arrive and ask you to start taking down the decorations, and you oblige. A large number of other attendees are already arriving, forming a crowd, and the police tell them they will have to leave. Before they have the chance to do anything further, the police break up the people gathering with pepper spray, plastic bullets and tear gas. Several people are injured, although none seriously. The police detain a number of people from the crowd, including yourself, before releasing you later that day.

Once you have given the participants a minute to let the information sink in, collect thoughts from participants in a group discussion. Use the following questions as a guide:

- **How did it feel to imagine the story? Do you think something like this would ever happen in reality?**
- **Do you think any human rights violations occurred in your story? Which ones?**
- **Do you know anyone or any groups of people who do not have the right to celebrate something important to them in your country? What about elsewhere in the world?**

Explain that the circumstances in which the authorities can restrict freedom of assembly are very narrow, and must be considered as exceptional rather than the norm. To explain the 'restrictions to peaceful assembly during the covid-19 pandemic' use the background information, pages 10.

*If it's the first time participants have been introduced to human rights, you can hand out the **UDHR** summary and spend some time building a shared understanding of what human rights and the **UDHR** are.*

2 INTRODUCING THE METU PRIDE DEFENDERS' STORY

🕒 15 MINUTES

Explain to participants that what you read out before was a fictitious event. However, there is an important event for the LGBTI community that, in some countries around the world, is completely banned or heavily restricted.

Use the background information at the end of the activity (see pages 10, 11 and 12) to support your introduction to LGBTI rights and Pride.

Explain that Pride started out as a commemoration of the Stonewall uprising – a demonstration against police raids for LGBTI people – in 1969 in New York.

Pride has evolved over the decades and is now celebrated annually as a form of solidarity, love, expression and belonging for the LGBTI community in many countries around the world. Pride is a celebration of people who face or have faced inequality, discrimination and violence just because of who they love, how they dress, and how they identify themselves.

From its activism roots, it continues to help address issues affecting LGBTI people all over the world. However, this isn't the case in many countries where LGBTI people face a range of human rights violations, from the banning of LGBTI events in some places to physical violence, abuse, being taken to court, imprisoned and even the death penalty.

Participation in Pride parades and events is an exercise of the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. LGBTI people face a lack of protection and lack of respect of their human rights, including by being subjected to



discrimination and excessive use of force in places where Pride celebrations have been banned. Pride is also a moment for others to express their solidarity with the LGBTI community.

Hand out the METU Pride Defenders' case card for people to read through and then split participants into small groups to discuss the following questions:

- **How do you feel reading about what happened to Melike, Özgür and the METU Pride Defenders?**
- **Are the charges against Melike, Özgür and their colleagues justified?**
- **Why do you think Pride is important for LGBTI people?**
- **Is it important for everyone to support Pride?**
- **How is Pride celebrated, or not, in your country?**

Bring participants back together and ask them to share some of the responses from their small group work.

3 IN THEIR WORDS

Hand out the quotes from Melike and Özgür on pages 13 and 14 to each participant. Give them time to read through the quotes alone, reflect on them and choose one which resonates strongly with them.

Once everyone has chosen a quote, ask them to share that quote with another person and explain why they chose that one or if your group is not too large, you may prefer to invite participants to share their favourite quote and reflection with the whole group instead.

4 DISCUSSING RIGHTS

If participants are still in pairs, bring them together in the group and conclude the reflection using the following questions as a guide:

- **What human rights are denied when Pride and LGBTI events are banned?**
- **What human rights violations or discrimination do LGBTI people suffer in your country?**
- **What can authorities in your country do in order to ensure the human rights of LGBTI people are respected?**
- **Is it important to show solidarity with movements like the LGBTI movement even if you yourself might not identify as LGBTI or live in that specific country? Why?**
- **What can the authorities in Turkey do in order to ensure METU LGBTI+ Solidarity Group and other LGBTI groups can enjoy their human rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly?**

It is important to share the background information on LGBTI rights (pages 10, 11 and 12) and the importance of Pride with the participants.

5 TAKE ACTION FOR THE METU PRIDE DEFENDERS

Ask participants what they think they can do in order to show solidarity with Melike, Özgür and the METU Pride Defenders.

Conclude by explaining to participants that Amnesty is calling on people around the world to take action on behalf of Melike and Özgür. Share some of the success stories from previous Write for Rights Campaigns and explain that Amnesty is encouraging people to write letters to the authorities and show solidarity for Melike and Özgür.

 **10 MINUTES**

 **15 MINUTES**

If you have time you may want to share the 1 min video about METU Pride Defenders
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/w4r-videos/>

 **10 MINUTES**

If you have time you can share the 5 min introductory video on Write for Rights on the Amnesty Academy website
<https://academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/145/write-for-rights-a-short-guide>

WRITE A LETTER – SAVE A LIFE

- Encourage them to write to Turkey’s Minister of Justice at the following address:

Mr Abdülhamit Gül

Minister of Justice

Adalet Bakanlığı

06659 Ankara

Turkey

Twitter: @abdulhamitgul

Email: info@adalet.gov.tr

Salutation: Dear Minister of Justice

Participants can use the template letters in the letter writing toolkit which you can download on the Write for Rights web page at <https://www.amnesty.org/writeforrights>.

Or you can give them the following guidelines to write a more personal letter:

Tell the minister something to make this a personal letter:

- Tell him something about yourself
- Tell him what shocks you about the case
- Remind the Minister of Justice that the unfair prosecution of the 18 METU students and the academic for their alleged participation in the Pride Parade on 10 May 2019 should conclude with their acquittal as no one should be convicted for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.
- Call on the Minister to ensure a prompt, independent and impartial investigation is carried out into the excessive use of force by the police on campus on 10 May and police officers found to have acted unlawfully are brought to justice.

SHOW SOLIDARITY – SUPPORT MELIKE AND ÖZGÜR

Encourage participants to share their pride in Melike and Özgür

Visit **METU LGBTI+ Solidarity Group**’s Twitter & Instagram feed [@odtulgbti](https://twitter.com/odtulgbti).

Take a photo with a Pride flag or draw your own Pride Flag and share on your social media channels, tagging [@odtulgbti](https://twitter.com/odtulgbti), and adding a message of support in the caption. Let them know what inspired you most from the quotes you read.

If there isn’t enough time for participants to do both actions immediately, encourage them to organize how to do so afterwards, or divide the actions among the groups. Encourage them to be creative.

As a follow-up activity you could get in contact with a local LGBTI group or NGO, to talk about their experience in taking part of Pride or what actions could be taken to get involved.



Pride celebration by students at the Middle East Technical University (METU) campus, in Ankara, Turkey, May 2018.

© Amnesty International Turkey

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

According to the UDHR, freedom of expression is the right of every individual to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers. **Freedom of expression** 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 and works of art. This right also protects your freedom to seek and receive information from other people.

Freedom of peaceful assembly 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.

The rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are enshrined in international human rights law, including in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as well as many national legal systems.

PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY IN THE TIME OF COVID

Although we have the right to freedom of assembly, it is not an unlimited right: sometimes governments have a duty to protect other people's rights or certain public interests which requires some assemblies to be prohibited. But the circumstances in which the authorities can restrict freedom of assembly are very narrow and must be considered as exceptional rather than the norm.

Public health is one such condition. However, the principles of necessity and proportionality must be respected at all times. As a rule, there should be no blanket bans on assemblies. Each assembly should be assessed on a case by case basis, and restrictions must be imposed only to the extent necessary and proportionate to achieve a legitimate end.

In response to the COVID-19-pandemic:

- Any restriction of assemblies must be based on the objective to protect public health.
- The restriction must be effective in achieving the objective to protect public health.



Pride celebration by students at the METU campus, in Ankara, Turkey, May 2018.

© ODTU LGBTI+

- Restrictions must be time-limited and regularly reviewed as to their necessity and proportionality.
- There must be no less-restrictive measures available to achieve the same objective.
- Complete prohibition of a specific assembly must remain the last resort.

Other measures must be considered as much as possible, including but not limited to the public health measures already in place in many countries. For example: limiting the number of participants; measures to ensure the distance between each participant; wearing of masks; informing the public and controlling access routes in order to avoid a mass surge of bystanders; negotiating with organizers on an appropriate time or place for the assembly in order to limit the risk of close contacts with or between non-participants, and other such controls.

And even within the range of these possible measures, authorities are duty bound to choose the least restricting that still allow the assembly to effectively convey its message.

LGBTI RIGHTS

In too many countries, being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) means living with daily discrimination. This discrimination could be based on your sexual orientation (who you're attracted to); gender identity (how you define yourself, irrespective of your biological sex), gender expression (how you express your gender through your clothing, hair or make-up), or sex characteristics (for example, your genitals, chromosomes, reproductive organs, or hormone levels.)

From name-calling and bullying, to being denied a job or appropriate healthcare, the range of unequal treatment faced is extensive and damaging. It can also be life-threatening.

In all too many cases, LGBTI people are harassed in the streets, beaten up and sometimes killed, simply because of who they are. A spate of violence against trans people has claimed the lives of at least 331 individuals between October 2018 and September 2019. Many intersex people around the world are forced to undergo dangerous, invasive and completely unnecessary surgeries that can cause life-long physical and psychological side effects.

Sometimes, hostility directed at LGBTI people is stoked by the very governments that should be protecting them. A state-sponsored campaign in Chechnya led to the targeting of gay men, some of whom have been abducted, tortured and even killed. In Bangladesh, LGBTI activists have been hacked to death by machete-wielding armed groups, with the police and government taking little interest in delivering justice to the families of victims. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, LGBTI people continue to live in fear of being found out and attacked or even murdered.

Consensual same-sex sexual activity is a crime in 70 countries, and can get you a death sentence in six countries, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen. And even where these restrictive laws are not actually enforced, their very existence reinforces prejudice against LGBTI people, leaving them feeling like they have no protection against harassment, blackmail and violence.



Melike Balkan and Özgür Gür
© AKIN CELIKTAS

LGBTI rights advocates have overcome enormous challenges and risks to their own personal safety to call out abuses of the human rights of LGBTI people, and force changes to laws that discriminate against them. From the introduction of the concept of Pride and global recognition days like the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Interphobia & Transphobia (also known as IDAHOBIT), LGBTI people are forging alliances and promoting pride in who they are worldwide.

The collective efforts of activist organizations around the world has paid real dividends. Today, at least 43 countries recognise homophobic crimes as a type of hate crime. And as of December 2019, 27 countries have made same-sex marriage legal.

PRIDE

Pride takes many forms – from carnivalesque marches, to film screenings and debates – and is a moment of celebration for LGBTI people and activists, their family members, friends, and allies.

Events are organized throughout the year, depending on where you are. In the Americas and Europe, the season usually kicks off in June, while February to March is Pride season in South Africa. Whatever the event, it's a moment for LGBTI people to show that they are out and proud to be who they are.

Pride festivals are banned in several countries around the world, including Russia, Saudi Arabia, Uganda and most recently Turkey. Pride celebrates the LGBTI movement in all its diversity, and amplifies the call to respect and protect LGBTI rights.

WHY ARE LGBTI RIGHTS IMPORTANT?

Everyone should be able to express their pride in who they are and who they love. We all have the right to express ourselves freely. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which set out for the first time the rights we're all entitled to) protects everyone's right to express themselves freely.

Bringing an end to homophobia and transphobia will save lives.

Discrimination against LGBTI people puts LGBTI identifying people or those considered to be LGBTI at a heightened risk of physical and psychological harm. Everyone has the right to life, freedom and safety.

By embracing LGBTI people and understanding their identities, we can learn how to remove many of the limitations imposed by gender stereotypes. These stereotypes are damaging across society, defining and limiting how people are expected to live their lives. Removing them sets everyone free to achieve their full potential, without discriminatory social constraints.

LGBTI people, especially transgender and gender non-conforming people, are often at risk of economic and social exclusion. Fighting for laws that are more inclusive of people regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity will allow them to access their rights to health, education, housing and employment.



Pride celebration by students at the Middle East Technical University (METU) campus, in Ankara, Turkey, May 2018.

© ODTU LGBTI+

IN THEIR WORDS – QUOTES

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL INTERVIEW WITH MELIKE BALKAN AND ÖZGÜR GÜR AT METU CAMPUS, ANKARA, JUNE 2020

Melike on what METU LGBTI+ Solidarity Group means for them and how they try to help others:

“When I arrived in METU I was 18 years old and I was coming from a conservative family. I did not have any LGBTI+ people around me which caused a fear inside of me. I was afraid to be myself. Then I joined METU LGBTI+ Solidarity and everything started to change because I felt that I belonged and that I could express myself.”

“As an open non-binary person, it was very hard for me at first to come out and talk to people but now I feel that I belong, and I can be whoever I want. That’s a huge thing for me and that’s what I tried to create in other people and in other kids that are coming to METU.”

Melike on why Pride marches are important:

“When people live their daily lives in a country like Turkey, they are not allowed to be themselves: you sometimes have the laws against you, you sometimes have the people and other organizations against you. But in Pride you get to come together and be yourself, your full unhaltered self. That’s an important feeling and it has a healing power. That ... is why we come together for Pride.”

“We learn from each other and we get power from each other. Just like BLM and other movements all around the world, LGBTI+ people need to come together and raise their voice. Pride is a beautiful celebration of that.”

Melike on how people can support LGBTI+ organisations:

“Talk to your local LGBTI+ organization and just ask them what they need. A lot of time LGBTI+ activists and human rights defenders around the world need to be heard and they also need your input.”

“Also, you can march with us and be with us, not just in the good times, or in countries where we are all free, but especially in countries like Turkey. Because we need your support, all around the world to defeat this homophobia and transphobia around us. We need people to come together and we need people to listen to our issues.”



Melike Balkan and Özgür Gür
© Private



Özgür on what motivates them to carry on with their activism:

“When I was a young student, I was aware of my identity, I was aware of my sexual orientation, I was searching a lot, but I was afraid to be myself. I always thought that after I start university everything would change, and everything has changed. When I started at METU, I found METU LGBTI+ Solidarity and I found people like me. I was able to share my experiences and hear theirs. I thought that from that moment I would not be alone.”

“I joined my first Pride march, which was the fifth METU Pride March, and it was a fantastic feeling: hearing all the chants, seeing people be whoever they want and feeling I can be whoever I want. This is what motivates me to carry on.”

Özgür on why Pride marches are important:

“Pride has an extraordinary value. If you look at the history of Pride, we see it in Stonewall, Istanbul Pride, in all Prides. It is a struggle against violence, against hate crimes, all over the world. Pride is a moment where you can express the things you experience in your life; you can be yourself. That’s why they are so important.”

Özgür on how people can support the LGBTI+ movement:

“We should first understand that the LGBTI+ movement does not just belong to the LGBTI+ people. It’s an equal rights movement. So, everyone has to support this movement to become equal. LGBTI+ people do not live in Space, we live in your neighbourhood, we go to the same schools and hospitals. People should realise that LGBTI+ people are everywhere and should be aware about the language they use, their behaviour towards LGBTI+ people and they should not discriminate. Most importantly people should be with LGBTI+ people so that they do not feel lonely.”



MELIKE BALKAN AND ÖZGÜR GÜR

From day one, biology students Melike Balkan and Özgür Gür dedicated themselves to defending lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights at their university.

As prominent members of the LGBTI+ Solidarity Group at Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, they've organized numerous marches, meetings and other events. They've engaged with an ever-growing number of students, against a backdrop of increasing homophobia and restrictions on freedom of expression in Turkey.

Founded in 1996, METU LGBTI+ Solidarity Group have organized an annual Pride march on campus since 2011. Over the years, Pride on METU campus grew in size and visibility. However, in 2019, the university's management told the students the Pride march planned for 10 May could not go ahead on campus.

Undeterred, the Solidarity Group staged a Pride sit-in instead. In response, the university called the police who used excessive force, including tear gas, against the peaceful protestors and bystanders. Police arrested at least 23 students – including Melike and Özgür – and an academic. 18 of the students and the academic are now on trial. Some of those detained hadn't even taken part in the protest and others were detained for simply exercising their right to peaceful protest.

If found guilty, they each face up to three years in prison.

“Now I feel that I belong, and I can be whoever I want”

Melike Balkan



ABOUT AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 7 million people who take injustice personally. We are campaigning for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all.

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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