



Crisis Readiness Toolkit for Women Leaders

A Guide on How to Use the Toolkit

2025

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Introduction

The Crisis Readiness Program equips women leaders with essential skills to manage risks and create effective safety plans for themselves, their organizations, and their communities. Developed by Vital Voices in collaboration with women changemakers in our Global Network, as well as expert partners on the ground, this participant-led initiative ensures the program's tools and trainings address the needs of women leaders facing threats and crises. Participants learn to develop actionable safety plans and strategies to counter online violence, respond to war and civil conflicts, safeguard against arrests and government targeting, evacuate during climate-related and other emergencies, and maintain mental health and well-being. The Readiness Toolkit is crafted to enhance the safety and security of women leaders in challenging environments, with this guide providing an overview of its components and instructions for effective application.

How to Use this Guide

This guide is intended to be used alongside the Crisis Readiness Toolkits, with each section representing a distinct toolkit. Identify the toolkit you need most, refer to the corresponding page in this guide, and follow the step-by-step instructions to integrate its strategies and resources into your daily life as a woman leader. Keep in mind, the toolkit and safety plan serve as an initial framework. They are highly adaptable and utilize what best suits your situation and collaborate with your team to put the plan into action.

Readiness Introduction Toolkit

Meet your Guide

Marie, a leader from Cameroon, introduces the toolkit with her personal story. She faces daily risks, including online threats, natural disasters, and safety concerns for her team and family. Through her experiences, Marie demonstrates how planning, testing, and acting can empower leaders to mitigate risks and build resilience.

Marie's story reminds us that leadership is not about avoiding challenges but preparing for them. Use her example as a source of inspiration to adapt the toolkit to your unique circumstances.

The Core Framework: Plan, Test, Act

The toolkit's framework revolves around three actionable steps:

- 1) Plan: Identify potential risks and threats to yourself, your team, and your organization.
- 2) Test: Assess the likelihood and impact of these risks to prioritize your response.
- 3) Act: Implement strategies to reduce vulnerabilities and enhance your capacity to respond effectively.

Think of this framework as your roadmap. Each step builds on the last, ensuring a comprehensive approach to readiness.

Identify Incidents

The first step is to identify the types of incidents that pose the greatest threat in your specific circumstance. These risks are unique to your situation. The toolkit categorizes incidents into:

- Natural Disasters: Floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.
- Human-Caused: Kidnappings, civil unrest, bomb threats, etc.
- Technological: Cyberattacks, internet outages, social media threats, etc.

How to use: List five potential threats specific to your context and organization.

Use this as a starting point to understand your vulnerabilities. This exercise is about clarity. By naming your risks, you take the first step toward mitigating potential impacts.

Assess Impacts

Once you've identified potential incidents, assess their impacts using the toolkit's chart. Consider how the incident impacts you, how it impacts your team, and how it impacts your organization.

How to use: Fill out the chart for each identified incident. Use the visual breakdown to prioritize which risks require immediate attention. This step brings focus to your planning. It

helps you understand not just what could happen, but what it means for the people and systems you care about.

Determine Risk Levels

Risk is a measure of how likely something is to occur and how severe its impacts would be should it do so. It comes down to a simple equation. Something that is "high" risk is an area where we want to spend the majority of our resources and planning efforts. Something "low" risk may still warrant some planning, but not nearly as much.

The toolkit provides a risk assessment matrix to evaluate the likelihood and severity of each incident:

- **Likelihood:** How probable is the incident?
- **Severity:** How significant would the impact be?

How to Use: Plot each incident on the matrix to categorize risks as low, medium, or high. Prioritize high-risk incidents for immediate action. This step transforms uncertainty into action. By quantifying risks, you can allocate resources where they're needed most.

Readiness is an ongoing process. Stay proactive, and don't hesitate to revisit the toolkit as your circumstances evolve. The **Readiness Toolkit for Women Leaders** is more than a guide—it's a call to action. By planning, testing, and acting, you can navigate risks with confidence and resilience. Remember, leadership is not about avoiding challenges but about rising to meet them. Let this toolkit be your partner in that journey.

[Mental Well-Being Toolkit](#)

The **Mental Health Readiness Toolkit** is designed to equip women leaders with practical tools, strategies, and resources to prioritize mental well-being and build resilience. Below is a comprehensive guide on how to make the most of this toolkit.

Trauma

Trauma is something we all can experience in our lives. Focusing on resources and protective factors can be an important way to keep yourself mentally well and protect yourself from future traumatic exposure.

How to Use: On the left-hand side of the chart, consider factors that might put you at risk of trauma such as your work, lack of community or coping skills. On the right-hand side of the chart, consider resources you already have to help protect you from trauma. These could include prioritizing your physical health, practicing your religion or spirituality, or engaging in your social network. This activity also helps you identify **protective factors** you need to cultivate.

Burnout and Vicarious Trauma

Burnout

Vicarious trauma and **burnout** can go hand in hand. Burnout can occur when you are lacking the protective factors you need to stay mentally well, like positive boundaries, support from coworkers and a safe working environment. When working in a traumatic environment, burnout is more likely.

Vicarious Trauma

Repeated exposure of trauma can lead to **vicarious trauma**. This page covers factors that might make someone vulnerable to vicarious trauma. Consider your own potential vulnerabilities to trauma. Understanding vulnerabilities is a powerful tool in moving towards the actions we can take to address them and maintain our self-care.

Maintaining Self Care

There are four main components of self-care: **Emotional, Physical, Intellectual, and Spiritual**. Self-care practices will be different for everyone. We may prioritize certain components more than others based on our beliefs and, it is important to recognize that there is a holistic approach to self-care involving different aspects of our lives. At the end of this toolkit, you will find additional information and exercises related to self-care.

How to Use: Use this activity to consider practices you're already doing and ones you can add or increase to keep yourself well. Remember, do what works for you. Our narrator finds going

on a walk works for her, but for you it could be listening to music, spending time with friends or praying.

Locus of Control

As a leader facing threats, vicarious trauma, and constant challenges, it's easy to feel like circumstances are out of your hands. This activity helps you explore your **locus of control**—the degree to which you believe you can influence outcomes in your life and work.

Understanding this can be a powerful tool for resilience. While some external threats may be beyond your control, recognizing where you *do* have agency—your responses, boundaries, and strategic choices—can strengthen your mental well-being. This exercise encourages reflection on how shifting your focus to areas within your control can foster a sense of empowerment and stability in difficult times.

How to Use: Think about what is causing you stress in your life. In the outer ring, write the things that you have zero (or very little) control over. In the middle ring, write the things that you can influence, but not entirely control. In the inner ring, write the things that you can mostly or entirely control.

Resiliency & Emotional Preparedness

When we think of emotional preparedness we may think of resiliency. **Resiliency** is not about learning how to put up with toxic patterns and relationships or developing coping mechanisms to continue exposing ourselves to unhealthy situations. Resiliency is about working through life challenges using personal resources such as social supports, coping mechanisms, sagacity (inner wisdom, our foresight or ability to make good judgments), and finding solutions.

How to Use: This activity, adapted from the Positive Psychology Program¹, considers how previous sources of **resilience** can be used in the future. Think of a time when you had a challenge you overcame. Then consider the sources of resilience you used to overcome that challenge. Examples could be behaviors you showed, inner wisdom or supports. Now think of a new challenge you've yet to solve. Think about how you can use those past sources of resilience to tackle this new challenge. This activity should remind you of what you've already overcome and the important sources of resilience you need to take on new challenges.

¹ Positive Psychology Program. <https://positivepsychology.com/resilience-skills/>

Digital Safety and Security Toolkit

Women leaders face unique challenges when navigating online spaces. The **Digital Safety and Security Toolkit** for Women Leaders is a resource for safeguarding your digital presence. This guide walks you through its features, focusing on practical steps to enhance your online safety and security.

Cyber Harassment

Online gender-based violence can have emotional effects and compromise your safety. Use this guide to safeguard yourself and take action against cyber harassment.

- Keep a Close Circle: Seek help from close friends, family members, or trusted contacts. Talking about harassment can help relieve stress and provide clarity. If necessary, take a break from social media to protect your mental well-being.
- Document Abuse: Keeping records of abusive communication is crucial for reporting and legal actions. Take photos or screenshots, collect IP addresses, save text messages, call logs and Call ID. Be ready to show this data as evidence for the legal authorities.
- Report Abuse: Depending on the platform and your location, different reporting mechanisms may be available. Most platforms have a feature to report and block users. Identify and keep a list of available resources, including local law enforcement, cybercrime units, and organizational support, to take action when needed.
- Incorporate Self Care: Eat fresh and healthy foods and stay hydrated. Try simple and regular exercise and keep strict hours of sleep, at least seven hours, in a quiet and dimly lit space. Seek professional care if your mental health is affected. Consider finding a support group for women going through similar experiences.

Account Security

Online accounts are vulnerable to cyber threats. Actively monitoring your online interactions is crucial to minimizing the risks of attacks.

How to Use:

- 1) List your accounts: Start with your most critical accounts (e.g. email, banking, social media)
- 2) Review security settings: Ensure you enable features like two-factor authentication, account recovery, and privacy controls.
- 3) Track Changes: Use the provided table to document updates and improvements.

Device Security Checklists

Your devices are your gateways to the digital world. The toolkit includes comprehensive device security checklists for laptops, phones, and tablets. Treat these checklists as your digital routine – regularly revisit and update them to stay secure.

Step 1: Identify Your Device

- In the "Device Name" field, write the name or model of the device you are securing (e.g., "Work Laptop - Dell XPS," "Personal Phone - iPhone 13").

Step 2: Review Each Security Measure

- Each row in the checklist represents a key security measure you should implement on your device.
- Read the "Measure" column carefully to understand the action required.

Step 3: Implement the Security Measures

- For each measure:
 - Follow the security recommendation.
 - Example: If the measure is "Enable Screen Lock," go to your device settings and ensure that a password, PIN, or biometric lock is enabled.
 - Verify that the measure has been applied.
 - If applicable, test the setting (e.g., lock the screen and unlock it using the set credentials).

Step 4: Mark Completion

- Once a security measure is implemented, check the corresponding "Complete" box.
- If you are unable to complete a measure immediately, leave it blank and revisit it later.

Step 5: Add Notes (If Necessary)

- Use the "Notes" section to add relevant details, such as:
 - Issues encountered (e.g., "Unable to enable encryption - need admin rights").
 - Additional steps taken
 - Reminders for future checks (e.g., "Check for software updates monthly").

Legal and Arrest Toolkit

The **Legal and Arrest Toolkit for Women Leaders equips** women leaders with the skills to navigate legal challenges, especially in high-risk situations such as arrest or rights violations. This guide will walk you through its key components, providing actionable steps to help you safeguard your rights and protect yourself.

What to Do If You Are Arrested

The toolkit provides a clear, step-by-step guide to follow if you are arrested, ensuring you can protect yourself and advocate for your rights.

Steps to Follow:

1. Ask if You Are Under Arrest: You have the right to be informed of the reason for your arrest.
2. Request Legal Representation: Clearly state that you will not speak without a lawyer present.
3. Document the Arresting Officer: Take note of the officer's name, badge number, and appearance.
4. Seek Medical Attention if Injured: Document injuries with photos and inform healthcare providers of their cause.
5. Write Everything Down: Record all details of the arrest as soon as possible to help refresh your memory later.

What NOT to Do

- Do not resist arrest or act aggressively.
- Avoid signing any documents without a lawyer.
- Do not answer questions without legal representation.
- Avoid discussing your case with anyone except your lawyer.
- Do not lose your composure—stay calm and focused.

Memorize these steps or keep a printed copy with you. In high-stress situations, having a clear plan can make all the difference.

Documenting an Incident

Accurate documentation is critical when facing mistreatment or rights violations.

How to Use:

- Descriptive Details: Record where, when, and who was involved. Be as specific as possible (e.g., colors, names, locations).
- Sequence of Events: Note what happened before, during, and after the incident.

- Medical Details: Document any injuries and keep medical records or photos securely stored.

Conduct a Stakeholder Analysis

Understanding who supports or opposes you is essential for navigating legal risks.

How to Use:

- Supporting Actors: Identify allies who can provide legal, emotional, or logistical support.
- Opposing Actors: List individuals or groups who may pose a threat to your safety or rights.
- Unknown Actors: Note individuals whose intentions are unclear and approach them cautiously.

Use this analysis to build a trusted network and avoid potential risks.

Prepare for Potential Detention

The toolkit recommends creating an action plan for detainment scenarios.

How to Prepare:

- Develop communication strategies to alert your network if detained.
- Identify legal representation in advance.
- Outline steps your team should take to advocate for your release.

Preparation is empowerment. Having a plan in place ensures you and your team can act swiftly and effectively.

The Legal Toolkit for Women Leaders is more than a guide—it's a lifeline for navigating legal challenges with confidence and resilience. By following the steps outlined in this guide, you can protect your rights, advocate for justice, and continue your vital work as a human rights defender.

Safety Plan Template

The **Safety Plan Template** for women leaders is designed to help you create an effective safety plan for potential incidents using the provided templates.

Step 1: Identify Plan Considerations

- I. Incident: Start by identifying potential threats. Consider incidents like arrests, natural disasters, or online harassment.
- II. Assessing Likelihood and Impact: Assess the probability of each threat. Determine the potential impact (High, Medium, Low). Measure its potential impact not just on you, but also on your team and organization. This evaluation helps prioritize resources and responses.
- III. Recognizing Warning Signs: Collaborate with your team to identify warning signs and list signs that indicate possible danger.

Step 2: Assess Resources

- I. Resources you have: List existing resources at your disposal. This can include key contacts, access to training, or skills.
- II. Resources you need: Identify additional resources required to enhance your safety plan. This can include physical resources such as security locks and barriers or technical resources such as training.

Step 3: Establish Trusted Contacts

Identify reliable individuals or organizations you can reach out to in case of an emergency. Document contact information securely and memorize it if possible. Be sure to include the names and direct phone numbers of each contact.

Step 4: Action Plan Development

Ready Phase

- I. Action: Detail actions to take before incidents occur, such as communicating itineraries or ensuring emergency contact lists are easily available for your team.
- II. Completion Tracking: Keep track of what has been completed to prevent any oversight.
- III. Timeline and Considerations: Assign timelines to each action and note any special considerations. This proactive planning sharpens your response capabilities.
- IV. Resources Needed: When you are filling out your plan, identify resources for each individual action.

Respond Phase

- I. Action: Establish clear actions to take immediately after an incident occurs. This involves contacting law enforcement, informing designated contacts, and implementing pre-planned safety measures.
- II. Completion Tracking: Maintain a log of each action taken during the response to provide reference for follow-up actions.
- III. Timeline and Considerations: Actions should be performed as soon as an incident occurs. Assign roles beforehand so everyone knows their responsibilities.

Recovery Phase

- I. Action: After the immediate danger has passed, check on the safety and well-being of all team members. Conduct a headcount and provide first aid and emotional support as needed. Document any injuries or issues.
- II. Completion Tracking: Track the completion of these actions post-incident to ensure thorough monitoring and care is provided.
- III. Timeline and Considerations: Conduct these safety checks as soon as the situation stabilizes to promptly address any health and safety concerns. Consider having a trained professional on hand.

Contact the Crisis Response team at crisis@vitalvoices.org.