VITAL VOICES
GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP

CRISIS READINESS GUIDEBOOK
FOR WOMEN LEADERS

A Guide to Crisis Safety Planning and Emergency Preparedness for Women Leaders

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ON THE COVER: Alida Vicente, an Indigenous leader from Palín, Guatemala leads a protest in Escuintla demanding the protection of democracy and the peaceful transition of power following the 2023 elections. As one of the prominent Indigenous women at the forefront of nationwide demonstrations, Alida stood against corruption and judicial interference, calling for respect for the people's will and Indigenous leadership in shaping Guatemala's democratic future.

INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, women leaders are facing escalating threats at the very moment their leadership is most needed. Authoritarianism is rising, conflict is spreading, and resources are shrinking. A May 2025 survey of the Vital Voices Network revealed that 58% of women leaders have experienced increased physical threats, 77% report a surge in online assaults, and 80% link these dangers directly to authoritarian crackdowns. The risks are mounting just as the world needs women's leadership most.

Yet in this environment of uncertainty and intimidation, women continue to step forward. They are leading with courage and vision. They are organizing communities, defending rights, and caring for the most vulnerable. Protecting their safety and security is essential for their own wellbeing and critical for preventing the erasure of their voices and leadership. As scholars Zoe Marks and Erica Chenoweth note: *"Women's political activism has clearly expanded and fortified democracy, a fact that autocrats and illiberal democrats intuitively understand and that explains their fear of women's empowerment."*

This is why crisis readiness matters. More than a checklist, readiness is a mindset and a set of tools that allow women leaders and their organizations to anticipate threats, test their responses, and act with confidence when crisis strikes. This guidebook draws on the Vital Voices Crisis Readiness Toolkit, offering the practical framework of Plan, Test, Act alongside resources for risk assessment, scenario planning, mental health, and specialized safety plans.

At Vital Voices, we know from experience that when women leaders are prepared, entire communities are stronger. In multiple countries where we work, readiness training has helped women develop comprehensive safety plans to protect against kidnappings and attacks. In regions devastated by natural disaster, women leaders have mobilized resources with speed and care. And in countless moments of upheaval, the ability to Plan, Test, and Act has made the difference between chaos and resilience.

The pages that follow are designed to put these tools into your hands. They are here to strengthen you, your team, and your organization, so you can continue to do what women leaders everywhere are doing in this critical moment: leading change, protecting communities, and finding power in solidarity in the face of rising threats.

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

This Guidebook provides practical tools and strategies to help women leaders prepare for and mitigate against the threats they face today.

The Guidebook has three main parts:

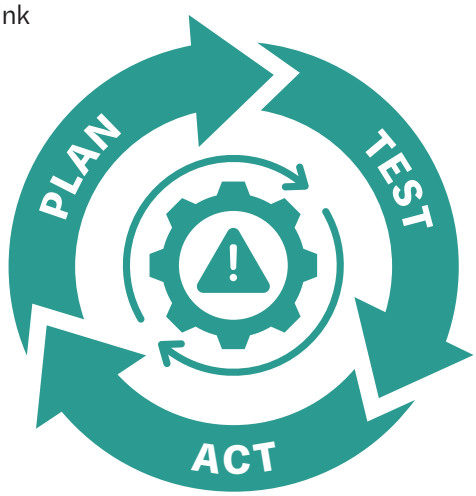
1. **The Readiness Framework:** Plan, Test, Act: A comprehensive, evidence-based strategy for crisis preparedness. These sections walk you through anticipating risks, testing your plans, and preparing to act swiftly and effectively.
2. **Incident-Specific Guidance:** Clear instructions on preparing for and mitigating against particular threats such as natural disasters, digital attacks, or kidnapping.
3. **Resource List:** Templates, worksheets and additional resources to dive deeper into Crisis Readiness.

The Guidebook is designed as a companion to the Vital Voices Crisis Readiness Toolkit, offering context, strategies, and real-world examples to complement the Toolkit's templates and activities. You can move through the Guidebook from start to finish, or you can go directly to the sections most relevant to your needs. The Guidebook helps you understand the "why" and "how" of crisis readiness, while the Toolkit provides the "what" or the concrete templates and activities to put your Plan, Test, Act Framework into practice. This is not a static resource. Return to it often as risks evolve and adapt its tools and strategies to fit your context.

Photo: UNICEF

PLAN, TEST, ACT FRAMEWORK

This Plan, Test, Act Framework is a mindset, not just a checklist. In our current moment, readiness is much more than the responsibility of any one person, or department. It is an organizational priority that must engage the whole team in understanding and putting into practice an ever-changing and evolving practice of preparedness. Utilize, integrate, prioritize and think about it as a way to strengthen you, your team, and your organization.



First, teams are encouraged to Plan: to anticipate risks, map resources, and develop clear protocols for a wide range of threats. Next, they Test these plans, running drills, engaging in scenario-based discussions, and ensuring that every member of the team knows their role when a crisis emerges. Finally, when a threat becomes reality, leaders and their teams are prepared to Act swiftly and decisively, drawing on their preparation and collective strength to protect themselves, their teams, and their communities. This iterative process ensures that safety planning is never static, but a living, evolving practice, one that adapts to new challenges and empowers women leaders and their teams to continue their work, even in the face of adversity.

Crisis readiness is not only about individual safety; it is also about organizational resilience. The Framework is designed to help women leaders safeguard their staff, protect sensitive information, and build systems that ensure continuity of their work, even under the most challenging circumstances. When organizations embed readiness into their culture, they create stronger, safer environments where teams can thrive, and leaders can focus on advancing their mission.

STEP 1: PLAN

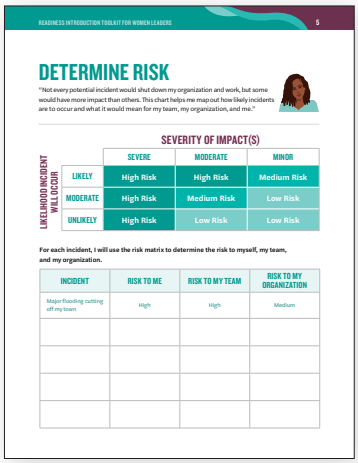
RISK ASSESSMENT AND WARNING SIGNS

Planning starts with a risk assessment. For women leaders, the landscape of risk is never static. It shifts with political tides, technological advances, and the visibility of your work. The act of leading, speaking out, organizing, and defending rights can itself become a trigger for targeted threats. That's why risk assessment isn't a one-time exercise; it's an ongoing practice, woven into the fabric of activism.

Risk Assessment:

Start by mapping the threats that are most present in your world. These may be physical, like surveillance or intimidation. They may be digital, like hacking, online harassment, or data breaches. Or they may be legal and political, like new laws, sudden investigations, or bureaucratic pressure. For each risk, ask yourself two questions:

- How likely is this to happen?
- If it does, how will it impact you, your team, or your entire organization?



READINESS INTRODUCTION TOOLKIT FOR WOMEN LEADERS 5

DETERMINE RISK

"Not every potential incident would shut down my organization and work, but some would have more impact than others. This chart helps me map out how likely incidents are to occur and what it would mean for my team, my organization, and me."

SEVERITY OF IMPACT(S)

LIKELIHOOD INCIDENT WILL OCCUR	SEVERE	MODERATE	MINOR
LIKELY	High Risk	High Risk	Medium Risk
MODERATE	High Risk	Medium Risk	Low Risk
UNLIKELY	High Risk	Low Risk	Low Risk

For each incident, I will use the risk matrix to determine the risk to myself, my team, and my organization.

INCIDENT	RISK TO ME	RISK TO MY TEAM	RISK TO MY ORGANIZATION
Major flooding cutting off my town	High	High	Medium

Risk assessments help teams **prioritize areas of focus** when resources are limited. Lower-likelihood or lower-impact risks can be monitored, while high-likelihood and high-impact risks require immediate **safety planning** and contingency measures.

The risk assessment guides the team in determining **which types of incidents require focused planning and readiness efforts**. It ensures time, staff, and resources are directed toward the most critical threats.

The risk assessment will also be used to **prioritize the development of incident-specific safety plans** outlined below. For example, if **legal detention or arrest** is assessed as a high-impact, moderate-likelihood risk, the team should prioritize **safety planning** around that issue — including legal support contacts, rapid notification procedures, and staff protection protocols.

This isn't about fear — it's about clarity. By naming the risks, you reclaim agency. You decide where to focus your energy and resources, and you refuse to be caught off guard.

Warning Signs:

A strong **risk assessment** doesn't just catalogue threats and vulnerabilities; it also builds in **early warning indicators**. These are the measurable or observable signs that a risk may be escalating toward an incident. Threats rarely appear out of nowhere. They can include a car parked too long outside your office, a spike in failed login attempts on your email, or a sudden request for paperwork from an official you've never met. These are signals that something may be shifting in your environment.

- Physical threats might look like unfamiliar faces lingering nearby, or direct verbal warnings.
- Digital threats might show up as odd account activity, unauthorized access alerts, social media threats, or unexplained data transfers.
- Legal or political threats might surface as increased scrutiny, new regulatory hurdles, or legal notices that arrive without warning.

The key is not to face these signs alone. Discuss them with your team, your allies, and your trusted network. Develop clear, actionable steps for each scenario. What will you do if you spot a warning sign? Who will you call? What information needs to be secured or shared?

Early recognition is not just about defense. It's about staying one step ahead, protecting your mission, and ensuring that your leadership endures, even in the face of adversity.

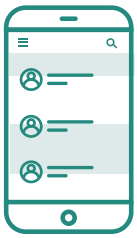
RESOURCE MAPPING

Effective safety planning begins with clarity, knowing not only what you have, but also what you may still need. Resource mapping is the process of turning that clarity into action. It is a strategic exercise that helps leaders recognize their strengths, uncover vulnerabilities, and build a foundation for rapid, coordinated response when threats arise.

STEP 1: INVENTORY YOUR RESOURCES

Begin by taking stock of everything at your disposal. Resources come in many forms. Some are tangible: devices, emergency funds, protective equipment. Others are intangible: specialized skills, institutional knowledge, or the strength of a trusted network. Mapping these assets provides a realistic picture of your current capacity and highlights the unique strengths that can be leveraged in a crisis.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY TRUSTED CONTACTS



No leader is an island. In moments of uncertainty, the ability to quickly reach out to reliable people or organizations can make all the difference. Identify those you can depend on, such as legal advisors, security professionals, medical contacts, or supportive allies. Document their information in a secure manner, and, where possible, commit key numbers to memory. This ensures that help is never more than a call away, even if digital records are inaccessible.

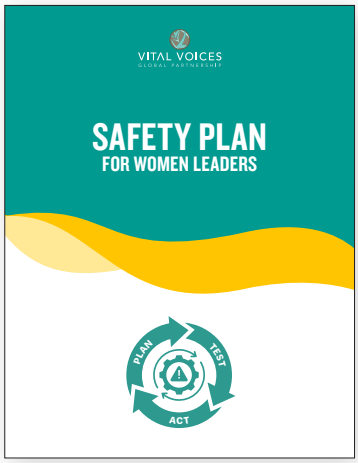
STEP 3: ADDRESS RESOURCE GAPS

With your inventory and contact list in hand, turn your attention to what's missing. Are there critical gaps that could undermine your ability to respond? Prioritize actions to close these gaps, whether that means installing security systems, seeking specialized training, or forging new partnerships. Resource mapping is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process. As threats evolve and your work grows, so should your resource map, ensuring you are always prepared to meet new challenges head-on.

SAFETY PLANNING

Now that risk and warning signs are understood, the next step is translating awareness into action. Effective crisis planning begins before danger strikes, when there is still time to think clearly and prepare. An essential place to start is to become familiar with and utilize the Safety Plan Template for Women Leaders. It is designed to map out risks, recognize warning signs, and build a clear, actionable framework for responding under pressure. It prompts leaders to identify potential incidents, such as arrests, online harassment, or natural disasters, and assess both the likelihood and the potential impact on individuals, teams, and organizations.

The template also guides an assessment of available and missing resources, from physical security tools and digital training to trusted partners who can be relied upon during emergencies. Establishing reliable contacts and securely documenting information ensures that support networks are ready to activate when needed most.



Finally, the template organizes actions across three phases:

1. **Ready:** Preventive measures before a crisis
2. **Respond:** Immediate steps once an incident occurs
3. **Recover:** Support and stabilization after the threat has passed.

This structured approach transforms uncertainty into clarity, equipping women leaders and their teams with the tools to prepare, respond, and rebuild after crisis.

The following section goes deeper into incident specific safety plans. Based on learnings from the Vital Voices Network, below are some of the most common incidents facing women leaders today. Use these templates to fill out your own holistic safety plan.

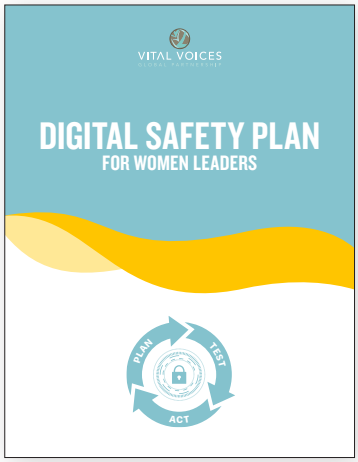
STORIES FROM THE FIELD:

The risks are real. Mariam, an Iranian journalist, was forced to relocate overnight and discard her devices after relentless online abuse and digital threats compromised her safety. Amina, a women's rights advocate, faced repeated summons and eventual detention for speaking out, but her legal readiness plan helped her secure release. Esther, a community leader in The Gambia, endured the trauma of kidnapping, yet her experience now helps others prepare for abduction risks. Their stories remind us that crises are not abstract — they happen every day to women activists and leaders. Throughout the guidebook, you'll find stories of women utilizing crisis readiness tools to safeguard themselves and their communities.

Access the Crisis Safety Plan Template here.

INCIDENT SPECIFIC SAFETY PLANS

DIGITAL SAFETY AND SECURITY



Your digital presence is a double-edged sword. For women leaders, it is both a megaphone and a potential target. The same platforms that amplify your voice and connect you to allies can also expose you to calculated digital threats such as hacking, phishing, harassment, and surveillance. These are not abstract risks; they are daily realities for women leaders.

Assessing Digital Threats

Start by naming the risks that live in your digital world. Who might want to access your accounts, disrupt your work, or silence your message? The threats are varied, but the patterns are familiar:

- Unauthorized access to your email, social media, or organizational accounts, sometimes subtle, sometimes brazen.
- Phishing attempts and suspicious links, designed to trick you or your team into giving up secrets or control.
- Data breaches or leaks, where sensitive information is exposed, sometimes weaponized.
- Online harassment, doxxing, or threats — campaigns meant to intimidate, shame, or drive you offline.
- Surveillance or monitoring, whether by hostile actors or authorities, tracking your every move.

For each threat, ask:

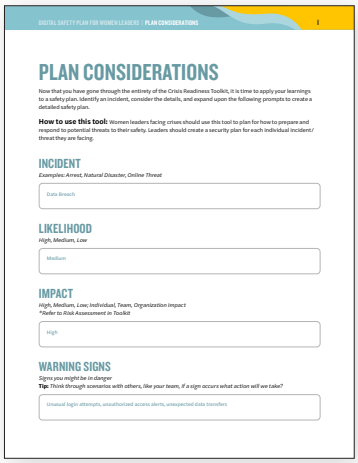
- How likely is this to happen in your context?
- If it does, what's at stake — your safety, your team's safety, your organization's mission?

Recognizing Warning Signs

Digital attacks rarely arrive without warning. They announce themselves in small glitches and odd messages, a password reset you didn't request, a login from a city you've never visited, files that disappear

or appear without explanation. Maybe your device slows down, or a new app shows up that you didn't install. Maybe you receive an email that feels off, even if you can't say why.

These are not just technical issues; they are signals. Trust your instincts. Early detection is your best defense.



DIGITAL SAFETY PLAN FOR WOMEN LEADERS | PLAN CONSIDERATIONS 1

PLAN CONSIDERATIONS

Now that you have gone through the entirety of the Crisis Readiness Toolkit, it is time to apply your learnings to a safety plan. Identify an incident, consider the details, and expand upon the following prompts to create a detailed safety plan.

How to use this tool: Women leaders facing crises should use this tool to plan for how to prepare and respond to potential threats to their safety. Leaders should create a security plan for each individual incident/threat they are facing.

INCIDENT

Examples: Arrest, Natural Disaster, Online Threat

Data Breach

LIKELIHOOD

High, Medium, Low

Medium

IMPACT

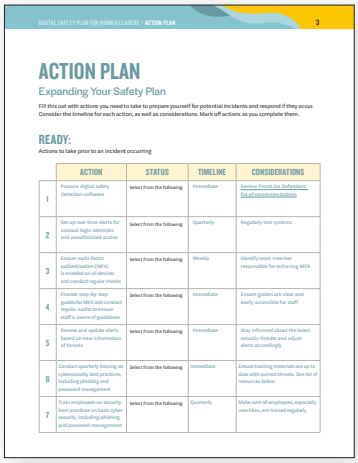
High, Medium, Low; Individual, Team, Organization Impact
**Refer to Risk Assessment in Toolkit*

High

WARNING SIGNS

Signs you might be in danger
Tip: *Think through scenarios with others, like your team, if a sign occurs what action will we take?*

Unusual login attempts, unauthorized access alerts, unexpected data transfers



DIGITAL SAFETY PLAN FOR WOMEN LEADERS | ACTION PLAN 3

ACTION PLAN

Expanding Your Safety Plan

Fill this out with actions you need to take to prepare yourself for potential incidents and respond if they occur. Consider the timeline for each action, as well as considerations. Mark off actions as you complete them.

READY:

Actions to take prior to an incident occurring

	ACTION	STATUS	TIMELINE	CONSIDERATIONS
1	Procure digital safety detection software	Select from the following	Immediate	Review FrontLine Defenders' list of recommendations
2	Set up real-time alerts for unusual login attempts and unauthorized access	Select from the following	Quarterly	Regularly test systems
3	Ensure multi-factor authentication (MFA) is enabled on all devices and conduct regular checks	Select from the following	Weekly	Identify team member responsible for enforcing MFA
4	Provide step-by-step guides for MFA and conduct regular audits to ensure staff is aware of guidelines	Select from the following	Immediate	Ensure guides are clear and easily accessible for staff
5	Review and update alerts based on new information of threats	Select from the following	Immediate	Stay informed about the latest security threats and adjust alerts accordingly
6	Conduct quarterly training on cybersecurity best practices, including phishing and password management	Select from the following	Immediate	Ensure training materials are up to date with current threats. See list of resources below
7	Train employees on security best practices on basic cyber security, including phishing and password management	Select from the following	Quarterly	Make sure all employees, especially new hires, are trained regularly

Strengthening Your Digital Security

Digital security is not a one-time fix; it's a set of habits, a culture you build into your daily work. Here's where to start:

- **Use Strong Passwords:** Every account deserves its own, complex password. Don't recycle. Use a password manager if you can.
- **Enable Two-Factor Authentication:** Make it harder for attackers to get in, even if they have your password.
- **Update Software Regularly:** Every update patches holes that attackers might use. Don't delay.
- **Secure Communication:** For sensitive conversations, use encrypted apps like Signal or WhatsApp. Assume that unencrypted channels can be monitored.
- **Limit Sharing:** Be mindful of what you post or send, especially on public platforms.
- **Train Your Team:** Make sure everyone around you knows how to spot phishing and other digital traps. One weak link can compromise the whole team's safety.
- **Back Up Data:** Regular, encrypted backups mean you can recover quickly if something goes wrong.
- **Monitor Accounts:** Check your account activity regularly. Catching unauthorized access early can prevent a crisis.

Digital security is about more than technology; it's about protecting your voice, your vision, and the people who depend on you. By making these practices routine, you turn your digital presence into a source of strength, not vulnerability.

STORY FROM THE FIELD:

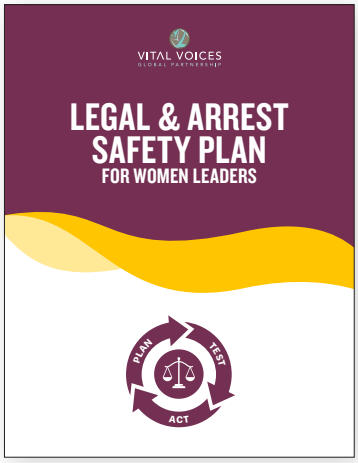
Mariam, an Iranian journalist with Iran International TV in London, became the target of relentless tech-facilitated abuse, including threats of kidnapping, rape, and execution, for her reporting on Iran. As the threats escalated and her devices were compromised, our Crisis Team acted quickly to protect her safety, supporting her immediate relocation and replacement of all devices. Once secure, Mariam resumed her reporting, demonstrating both the importance of recognizing risks early and the critical role of rapid response in enabling women leaders to continue their work.

Access the Digital Security Safety Plan here.

Access the Digital Security Toolkit here.

LEGAL AND ARREST

For women leaders, the law is not always a shield. In many contexts, it can become a weapon wielded by those in power to intimidate, silence, or punish those who challenge the status quo. Legal threats and the risk of arrest are not distant possibilities; they are tactics used with increasing frequency against women who lead, organize, and speak out.



Assessing Legal and Arrest Risks

Begin by mapping the legal landscape around you. What laws or regulations could be used against you or your organization? Who are the actors, state or non-state most likely to invoke legal pressure? The risks may include:

- Sudden or arbitrary arrest, often without clear cause or due process.
- Legal harassment: repeated summons, investigations, or bureaucratic obstacles designed to drain your time and resources.
- Restrictive laws targeting your work, speech, or assembly.
- Surveillance and increased monitoring by authorities, sometimes leading to fabricated charges.

For each risk, ask:

- How likely is this threat, given your work and your visibility?
- If it occurs, what are the consequences for you, your team, and your organization?

Recognizing Warning Signs

Legal threats rarely arrive without warning. They often begin as whispers, an uptick in official scrutiny, new paperwork requirements, or rumors of investigations. Warning signs may include:

- Receiving legal notices, summons, or unexplained requests for documentation.
- Sudden changes in local regulations that seem tailored to restrict your activities.
- Increased monitoring or surveillance by authorities.
- Direct or indirect threats from officials or other actors with influence.

These signs are signals, opportunities to prepare, seek counsel, and activate your support network before a situation escalates.

Strengthening Your Legal Preparedness

Legal resilience is built on preparation, not just reaction. Here's how the Vital Voices approach guides women leaders:

- **Know Your Rights:** Understand the laws and regulations that govern your work. Know what authorities can, and cannot, legally require.
- **Secure Legal Representation:** Identify and establish relationships with trusted legal advisors before you need them. Memorize key contacts.
- **Document Everything:** Keep detailed records of your activities, communications, and any interactions with authorities. Documentation can be your strongest defense.
- **Plan for Arrest:** Have a clear protocol for what to do if you or a team member is detained. This includes who to contact, what information to share, and how to ensure your safety and the safety of others.
- **Emergency Contacts:** Maintain an up-to-date list of trusted contacts, legal, organizational, and personal, who can be mobilized quickly in a crisis.
- **Train Your Team:** Ensure your team knows the plan and their roles if legal threats arise. Practice scenarios so that everyone is ready to act under pressure.
- **Consider Mental Health Support:** Recognize the psychological toll of legal harassment and arrest. Build in support for yourself and your team.

Legal threats are designed to isolate and intimidate people. By preparing in advance, you refuse to be caught off guard. You transform fear into strategy, and vulnerability into collective strength. The law may be used as a weapon, but with the right preparation, it can also become a line of defense, one that protects your mission and your right to lead.

STORY FROM THE FIELD:

Amina, a women's rights advocate, was repeatedly summoned by authorities and accused of "inciting unrest" for speaking out. Due to prior safety planning, her team acted quickly, connecting her with legal counsel, preparing her for detention, and setting up a rapid alert system. When she was briefly detained during a protest, these preparations allowed her to assert her rights, contact her lawyer, and secure release within hours.

Access the Legal/Arrest Safety Plan here.

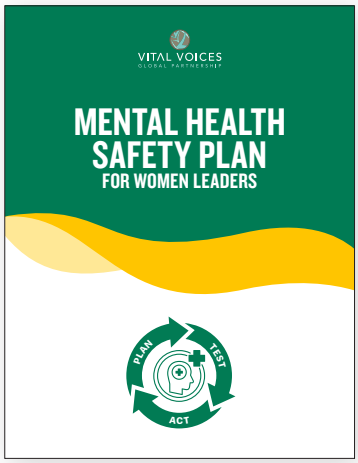
Access the Legal/Arrest Toolkit here.

MENTAL WELLBEING

Leadership in the face of adversity is not just a test of strategy or courage; it is a test of spirit. For women leaders, the pressures are relentless. The threats may be physical, digital, or legal, but their impact is deeply personal. Stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and trauma are not signs of weakness; they are the natural consequences of standing up, repeatedly, in environments designed to wear you down.

Recognizing the Risks to Mental Wellbeing

The risks to mental health are often invisible, but their effects are profound. Chronic stress can erode decision making, sap creativity, and strain relationships. Trauma, whether from direct attacks, harassment, or simply the weight of constant vigilance, can linger long after the immediate threat has passed. For women leaders, the expectation to be resilient can itself become a burden, making it harder to ask for help or even acknowledge the toll.



Warning signs may include:

- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Persistent feelings of anxiety, sadness, or anger
- Sleep disturbances or physical symptoms with no clear cause
- Withdrawal from colleagues, friends, or family
- A sense of hopelessness or loss of purpose

Mental wellbeing is not a solitary pursuit. It is a collective practice, woven into the fabric of resilient leadership. The Vital Voices approach centers care as a core component of safety planning:

- **Normalize Conversations:** Create spaces where it is safe to talk about stress, fear, and exhaustion, without stigma or judgment.
- **Incorporate Peer Support:** Build networks of solidarity, both within your team and across movements. Sometimes the most powerful support comes from those who understand your struggle firsthand.
- **Access Professional Help:** Identify mental health professionals, counselors, therapists, trauma specialists, who are trusted and accessible. Know how to reach them before a crisis.
- **Integrate Self-Care:** Make rest, reflection, and renewal part of your routine. This is not indulgence; it is essential maintenance for sustained leadership.
- **Debrief and Process:** After a crisis or intense period, take time to debrief as a team. Share experiences, acknowledge challenges, and celebrate resilience.
- **Plan for the Long Haul:** Recognize that mental wellbeing is not a one-time fix. It requires ongoing attention, adaptation, and investment.

Access the Mental Wellbeing Safety Plan here.

Access the Mental Wellbeing Toolkit here.

The work of women leaders is vital, and so is their wellbeing. By centering mental health, we reject the myth that strength means never struggling. Instead, we affirm that true resilience is built on care, connection, and the courage to ask for support. In the face of adversity, tending to mental wellbeing is not just an act of self-preservation; it is a radical act of leadership.

STORY FROM THE FIELD:

Grace, a women's rights leader running a girls' empowerment organization in the informal settlements of Kenya, began experiencing severe burnout. The constant demands of leading in a high-stress environment left her unable to sustain her daily responsibilities. Guided by the mental health best practices outlined in this guidebook, Grace took proactive steps to safeguard her wellbeing: she sought therapy support, delegated tasks within her team, and created regular space for rest and recovery. With these practices in place, she regained her energy and resilience, allowing her to continue her work with clarity and focus.

PHYSICAL ATTACKS

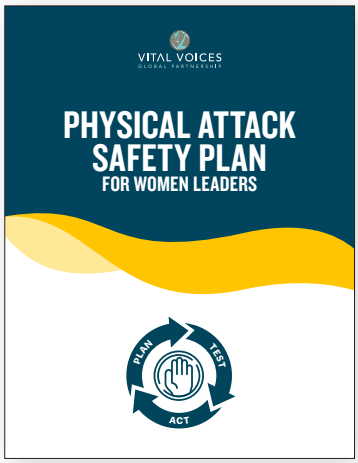
Physical threats are immediate, visible, and designed to intimidate. Women leaders and their teams operating in high-risk environments often face situations where hostile actors can appear unexpectedly, outside their homes, during field visits, or even while traveling between work sites. Recognizing the warning signs, such as unfamiliar individuals loitering nearby, repeated surveillance, explicit threats, or suspicious vehicles, creates an opportunity to act before an incident escalates. These moments are critical: they allow teams to reassess vulnerabilities, alert trusted contacts and implement protective measures.

Recognizing the Risks

Certain warning signs indicate the potential for a physical threat and provide opportunities to act before a situation escalates:

- Individuals repeatedly watching or following a target or team members
- Unfamiliar people loitering near homes or workplaces
- Explicit threats delivered verbally, in writing, or electronically
- Unknown vehicles parked nearby for extended periods

These signals allow teams to assess vulnerabilities, alert trusted contacts, and implement preventive measures. Planning for potential scenarios in advance ensures that responses are coordinated and effective.



Strengthening Readiness

Physical security is built on preparation:

- **Identify Resources:** Identify available tools, skills, and support networks, and determine additional resources, security devices, secure communications, professional assessments, or emergency contacts.
- **Establish Trusted Contacts:** Establish reliable individuals or organizations to call during emergencies, documenting contact information securely.
- **Organize Your Planning:** Organize responses in three phases:
  - **Ready Phase:** Preventive measures, including securing homes and workplaces, installing security systems, maintaining emergency kits, practicing self-defense, and conducting team drills.

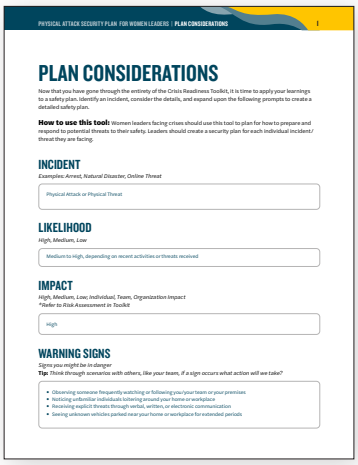
- **Respond Phase:** Immediate actions during an attack, such as contacting law enforcement, activating team protocols, moving to safe locations, and documenting the incident.
- **Recover Phase:** Post-incident steps, including reviewing security protocols, debriefing with trusted contacts, seeking professional support, and updating the plan based on lessons learned.

Self-Defense and Team Coordination

Training and practice enhance the effectiveness of a safety plan. Key components include:

- Situational awareness to recognize and avoid threats
- Verbal de-escalation techniques to prevent confrontation
- Basic physical defense techniques and escape strategies
- Coordinated team responses to protect each other and exit safely
- Emergency drills and scenario-based exercises to reinforce preparedness

A comprehensive physical attack safety plan provides clear steps to manage risks, protect individuals and teams, and maintain operations even in high-risk environments.



PHYSICAL ATTACK SECURITY PLAN FOR WOMEN LEADERS | PLAN CONSIDERATIONS 1

PLAN CONSIDERATIONS

Now that you have gone through the entirety of the Crisis Readiness Toolkit, it is time to apply your learnings to a safety plan. Identify an incident, consider the details, and expand upon the following prompts to create a detailed safety plan.

How to use this tool: Women leaders facing crises should use this tool to plan for how to prepare and respond to potential threats to their safety. Leaders should create a security plan for each individual incident/threat they are facing.

INCIDENT

Examples: Arrest, Natural Disaster, Online Threat

Physical Attack or Physical Threat

LIKELIHOOD

High, Medium, Low

Medium to High, depending on recent activities or threats received

IMPACT

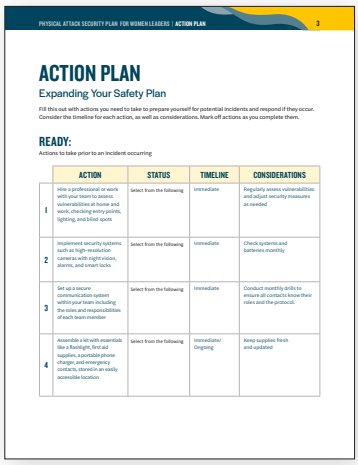
High, Medium, Low; Individual, Team, Organization Impact
**Refer to Risk Assessment in Toolkit*

High

WARNING SIGNS

Signs you might be in danger
Tip: *Think through scenarios with others, like your team, if a sign occurs what action will we take?*

- Observing someone frequently watching or following you/your team or your premises
- Noticing unfamiliar individuals loitering around your home or workplace
- Receiving explicit threats through verbal, written, or electronic communication
- Seeing unknown vehicles parked near your home or workplace for extended periods



PHYSICAL ATTACK SECURITY PLAN FOR WOMEN LEADERS | ACTION PLAN 3

ACTION PLAN

Expanding Your Safety Plan

Fill this out with actions you need to take to prepare yourself for potential incidents and respond if they occur. Consider the timeline for each action, as well as considerations. Mark off actions as you complete them.

READY:

Actions to take prior to an incident occurring

	ACTION	STATUS	TIMELINE	CONSIDERATIONS
1	Hire a professional or work with your team to assess vulnerabilities at home and work, checking entry points, lighting, and blind spots	Select from the following	Immediate	Regularly assess vulnerabilities and adjust security measures as needed
2	Implement security systems such as high-resolution cameras with night vision, alarms, and smart locks	Select from the following	Immediate	Check systems and batteries monthly
3	Set up a secure communication system within your team including the roles and responsibilities of each team member	Select from the following	Immediate	Conduct monthly drills to ensure all contacts know their roles and the protocol.
4	Assemble a kit with essentials like a flashlight, first aid supplies, a portable phone charger, and emergency contacts, stored in an easily accessible location	Select from the following	Immediate/ Ongoing	Keep supplies fresh and updated

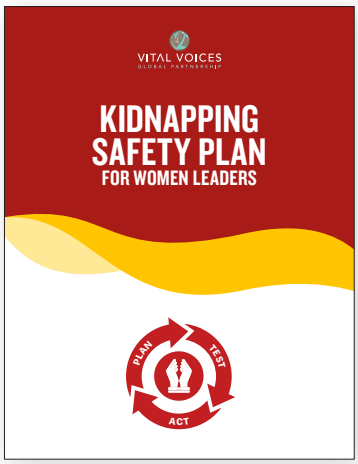
STORY FROM THE FIELD:

Anika, a human rights activist in India, was physically assaulted during a field visit to a rural community. Prior warning signs such as suspicious individuals near her office and home had prompted her to develop a safety plan with her team. During the attack, she quickly moved to a safe location, alerted her trusted contacts, and documented the incident. Following the event, debriefing and updates to security protocols helped Anika recover and reinforced her preparedness for future fieldwork and advocacy activities.

Access the Physical Attack Safety Plan here.

KIDNAPPING

Threats of abduction are real, deliberate, and designed to isolate, intimidate, and destabilize. For women leaders, understanding these risks and preparing in advance transforms fear into strategy and vulnerability into resilience. Kidnapping safety planning is not just about survival, it is about maintaining autonomy, protecting teams, and preserving the ability to continue leading in high-risk environments.



Recognizing the Risks

Early warning signs are critical opportunities to act before a situation escalates:

- Unknown individuals soliciting personal information
- Major data leaks exposing sensitive details
- Unvetted suppliers, vendors, or partners
- Colleagues or partners acting on grievances
- Unfamiliar individuals loitering around home or workplace
- Suspicious vehicles parked nearby
- Explicit threats via verbal, written, or digital communication

These signs signal the need to activate safety networks, assess vulnerabilities, and take preventive measures.

Strengthening Readiness

Kidnapping resilience is built on preparation, not just reaction:

- **Identify Resources:** Identify what tools, skills, and support networks are available, and what additional resources, such as professional security assessments or emergency funds, are needed.
- **Establish Trusted Contacts:** Establish reliable individuals or organizations who can respond quickly in a crisis, documenting secure contact information and communication channels.
- **Secure Physical Spaces:** Secure your physical location by removing signage, vary your routine, and train in situational awareness or self-defense for yourself and your team.
- **Secure Digital Security:** Remove or hide high-risk online information, set up encrypted communications for sensitive conversations and ensure your team and organization are trained on digital safety best practices.

- **Monitor and Document:** If threatened or arrested, report unusual activity, monitor digital exposure, comply strategically with captors, and observe captor behavior to guide decisions.
- **Prepare for Reintegration:** Consider relocation to a safe house, medical and psychological support, reassessment of security protocols, and reintegration planning for leaders and their teams.

Effective planning turns uncertainty into clarity. With a comprehensive kidnapping safety plan, women leaders can navigate threats with confidence, safeguard their teams, and emerge from crises prepared to continue their mission.

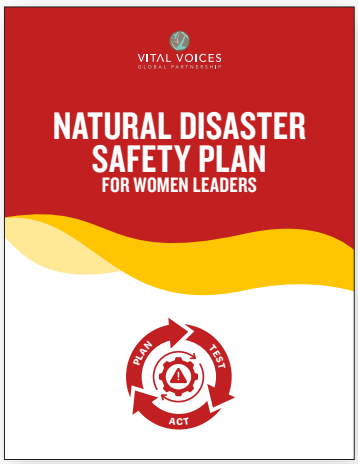
Access the Kidnapping Safety Plan here.

STORY FROM THE FIELD:

Esther, a women's rights activist in The Gambia, was kidnapped while driving home. She quickly enacted her safety plan alerting her core team she was in danger. Her team was able to mobilize swiftly to connect with hostage negotiation experts, and ultimately secure her safe return. Her plan also included psychosocial support and long term recovery efforts ensuring she could continue her activism.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Nature's power is unpredictable. For women leaders, natural disasters, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, wildfires, and more, can upend not only daily life but also the very foundations of their work. In moments of crisis, the vulnerabilities of a community are laid bare. Yet, it is often women leaders who rise to meet these challenges, coordinating relief, safeguarding their teams, and holding communities together.



Assessing the Risks of Natural Disasters

No region is immune to the forces of nature. The first step is to understand the specific threats in your environment. Is your community prone to seasonal flooding? Are you in an earthquake zone? Does political instability make disaster response even more complex? For each hazard, consider:

- **Likelihood:** How often do these disasters occur? Are there warning systems in place?
- **Impact:** What would be the consequences for your team, your organization, and the people you serve? How would your operations be disrupted? Who is most at risk?

Recognizing Warning Signs

Natural disasters often arrive with warning, sometimes hours, sometimes only moments in advance. Early signs might include:

- Weather alerts or government warnings
- Unusual environmental changes (rising water, tremors, smoke)
- Communication from local authorities or emergency services
- Community rumors or sudden shifts in local behavior

The key is to treat every warning seriously and to have a plan that can be activated quickly.

Strengthening Your Preparedness

Preparation is an act of leadership. The Vital Voices approach encourages women leaders to:

- **Develop an Emergency Plan:** Know evacuation routes, safe shelters, and emergency contacts. Make sure every team member knows the plan and their role in it.
- **Build Resource Kits:** Prepare "go bags" with essentials, documents, medications, food, water, communication devices, and cash.
- **Secure Critical Information:** Back up important data and store copies in safe, accessible locations, both digitally and physically.
- **Establish Communication Protocols:** Designate primary and backup ways to stay in touch with your team and community during and after a disaster.
- **Map Community Assets:** Identify local resources, health centers, safe spaces, transportation options that can be mobilized in an emergency.
- **Practice and Review:** Conduct regular drills and update plans as risks evolve or new information becomes available.

Leadership in Crisis

In the aftermath of disaster, women leaders are often the first to respond and the last to leave. Your foresight and preparation can mean the difference between chaos and coordinated action, between loss and resilience. By planning ahead, you not only protect your team and your mission, but you also model the kind of leadership that inspires trust and hope in the most uncertain times. Natural disasters test the strength of communities and the resolve of those who lead them. With preparation, solidarity, and a clear plan, women leaders can turn moments of crisis into opportunities for collective resilience and renewal.

STORY FROM THE FIELD:

A women's cooperative leader in Morocco faced devastation when a 6.8 magnitude earthquake destroyed the cooperative and left many community members without homes or loved ones. Despite her own losses, she quickly mobilized relief, organizing medical caravans, distributing supplies, and prioritizing women and girls' needs. Following the best practices in this guidebook's natural disaster section, her leadership strengthened the resilience of the entire community.

Access the Natural Disasters Safety Plan here.

SCENARIO PLANNING

STEP 2: TEST

One of the most effective ways to ensure your safety plan will hold up under pressure is to test it. Scenarios give you and your team the chance to rehearse how you would respond if a crisis unfolded in real life. Think of them as a "tabletop rehearsal" or a way to practice together, discover gaps, and strengthen your plan before it's needed.

WHAT IS A SCENARIO?

A scenario is a short, realistic exercise where you imagine a specific crisis unfolding, such as the arrest of a team member, a digital attack, or a natural disaster. By walking through the steps of your response plan, you test how well your systems, roles, and communication strategies actually work.

HOW TO RUN A SCENARIO

1. **Choose the incident**
   Pick a realistic threat for your team (for example: the arrest of a leader at the airport, a ransomware attack on your email system, or staff stranded during a flood).
2. **Set the scope and goals**
   Decide what you want to test. Are you focusing on communication protocols? Team activation? Decision-making under stress? Keep goals simple and clear.
3. **Outline the story**
   Write a short summary of the incident. Be specific: Where does it happen? Who is involved? What is the trigger event?
4. **Assign roles**
   Choose 3-5 key roles to play in the exercise (e.g., Executive Director, driver, staff coordinator, security forces) and assign one facilitator to guide the discussion.
5. **Walk through the scenario**
   The facilitator presents the crisis as if it is happening in real time. Break the incident into timed "events" (every 10-15 minutes) and ask open-ended questions:
   a. Who should be alerted first?
   b. How will communication happen if a phone line fails?
   c. Who makes the key decision at this stage?

6. **Add challenges**
   To test adaptability, introduce realistic disruptions: a missing staff member, an unavailable resource, or misinformation circulating online.
7. **Debrief together**
   After the scenario, reflect as a group. What worked? Where was there confusion? What needs to change? Capture observations and turn them into specific improvements.

AFTER-ACTION REVIEW

A scenario only strengthens readiness if lessons are carried forward. Document what you observed, what recommendations emerged, who will take responsibility for changes, and when those changes will be made. Start with the basic question: 'What went well and what are the areas for improvement?' Write down all your observations and answers to these questions and develop an actionable and realistic plan for improvements. Don't take on too many tasks, focus on those things you and your team can realistically put into practice over the coming weeks and months. Then test all over again, by running a scenario, and determine if you are putting recommendations into practice. The key is gradual improvement over time. This step transforms a one-time exercise into ongoing improvement.

TIP: Scenarios don't need to be long or complicated. Even a 30-minute exercise can reveal valuable lessons. What matters most is building the habit of testing, so that when a real crisis comes, your team doesn't face it for the first time.

PUTTING YOUR PLAN INTO ACTION

STEP 3: ACT

No crisis will ever unfold exactly the way you trained for it. But the act of preparing, practicing scenarios, strengthening systems, and building habits creates clarity when uncertainty hits. It helps you remain steady, focused, and able to make thoughtful decisions even when circumstances feel unpredictable. Preparation does not eliminate crisis. But it does shape how you meet it.

By acting on these tools regularly and deliberately, you build a foundation of resilience that protects you, your team, and the communities that depend on your leadership. Readiness is a continuous cycle. Your action is what keeps it alive.

Here is how to put this practice into action:

1. **Make readiness a monthly practice.** Set a recurring time to review risks, update contacts, refresh warning signs, and strengthen your digital, legal, mental health, and physical safety systems. Consistency is what turns preparation into habit.
2. **Assign ownership.** Identify who on your team is responsible for updates, drills, communications, legal support, and wellbeing checks. When roles are clear, responses are quicker, more coordinated, and more effective.
3. **Run at least one scenario every quarter.** Choose a realistic crisis such as an arrest, a digital breach, a natural disaster, or an incident during travel. Walk through your response as a team. Discuss what worked and what needs adjustment, and apply those lessons immediately.
4. **Share your Safety Plans.** Ensure that trusted staff and allies know where your plans are stored, how to activate rapid alerts, and what steps to take if you or a team member is in danger. A plan only works when the right people can use it.
5. **Expand your support network.** Build relationships with lawyers, digital security experts, mental health professionals, first responders, and rapid response organizations before you need them. Strong networks make you more resilient.
6. **Keep your mission at the center.** Your safety planning protects your ability to lead. These tools are here to support your work and ensure that your voice, your team, and your community remain strong, even in moments of disruption.

RESOURCES

Crisis Readiness Research

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Disaster Preparedness and Response Guidelines
Comprehensive guidelines outlining best practices and protocols for effective disaster preparedness and emergency response by humanitarian actors.

UN OCHA Emergency Response Preparedness (ERP) Guidelines
A structured approach to anticipating, preparing for, and responding to emergencies with coordinated humanitarian action.

Open Briefing Civil Society Preparedness and Risk Mitigation Resources
Practical tools and guides supporting NGOs, activists, and journalists with security, risk, and crisis management.

Digital Safety and Security

Vital Voices Digital Security Toolkit
A practical guide to strengthening online safety and protecting against digital threats.

Access Now 24/7 Helpline
Immediate, around the clock support for activists and organizations facing digital security emergencies.

Mental Wellbeing

Vital Voices Mental Wellbeing Toolkit
Tools and strategies for maintaining mental health and resilience in high-stress environments.

How to Manage Stress with Mindfulness Meditation
Step-by-step guidance on using mindfulness to reduce stress and restore focus.

The Self-Care Wheel
A visual tool to build balanced self-care routines across emotional, physical, and social dimensions.

Legal and Rights Protection

Vital Voices Legal and Arrest Toolkit
Practical checklists and guidance to prepare for and respond to legal threats or arrest.

Frontline Defenders
Global organization providing rapid support and protection to human rights defenders at risk.

Vital Voices Incident Specific Safety Plans

Tailored checklists for preparing, responding, and recovering from different crisis scenarios.

Safety Plan Template
A customizable framework to create individualized safety and response strategies.

Mental Wellbeing
Guidance on recognizing symptoms and taking proactive steps to safeguard emotional health during crises.

Digital Security
Steps to prevent, detect, and respond to online attacks or breaches.

Legal and Arrest
Actions to take before, during, and after facing legal charges or detention.

Natural Disasters
Preparedness and recovery measures for responding to environmental emergencies.

Physical Attack
Immediate and follow-up steps to mitigate harm from targeted violence.

Kidnapping
Safety planning strategies for prevention, survival, and recovery in abduction scenarios.

Networks and Support

Vital Voices Global Network

Frontline Defenders Protection Grants
Emergency grants that provide immediate protection and relocation support for at-risk activists.

Urgent Action Sister Funds
Rapid response funding to help women human rights defenders facing urgent threats.

VITAL VOICES
GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP

www.VitalVoices.org