

NAVIGATING RISKS INTERNATIONAL SPACES AS A YOUNG ADVOCATE

Safeguarding Yourself and Your Mental Health



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INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO OUR GUIDE!

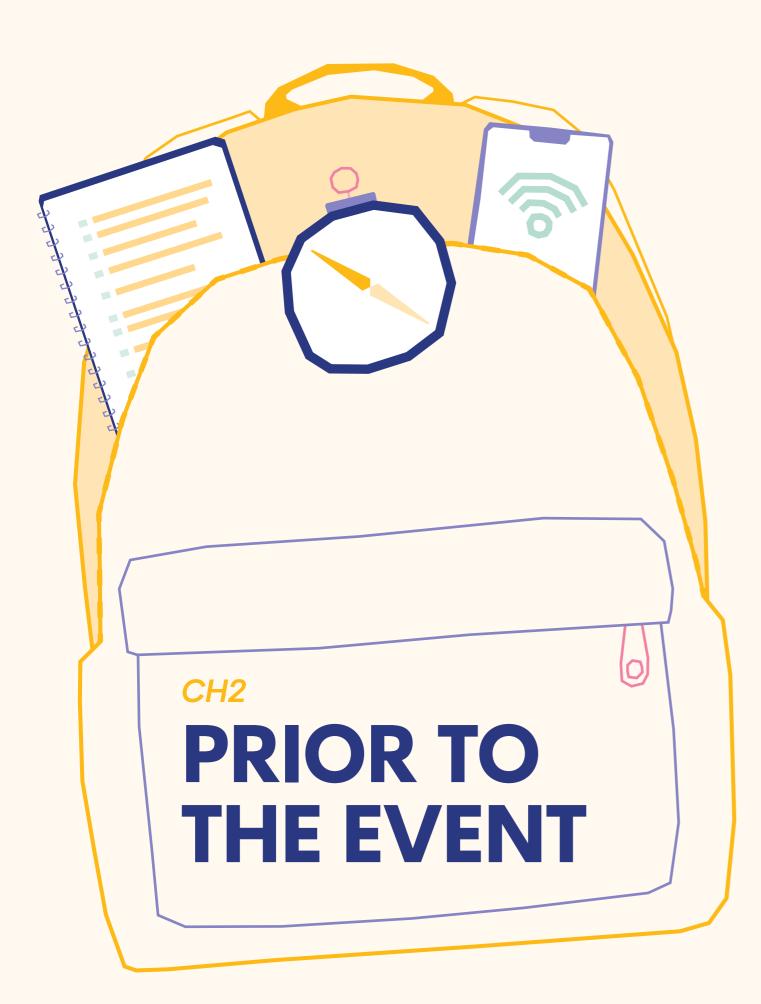
Attending an international conference can be an extremely enriching experience; meeting new people, collaborating with partners and spreading intersectional feminist values around the world. But it can also be overwhelming in many ways, physically and emotionally. It often involves international travel, visa applications, mapping which sessions to participate in, late night negotiations of policies and adapting to new environments.

Increasingly there is also a need for heightened security due to possible physical and cyber-attacks on activists and pro-SRHR advocates while attending international conferences. We hope this security guide, tailored for CHOICErs, partners, allies, and young advocates, serves you as a vital resource for navigating the complexities of online and in-person events. Continuously evolving to address new risks in real life and in the digital realm, this guide offers practical tips and preparations for engaging with opposition groups during international advocacy events.



While we strive to equip you with the best tools and knowledge, it's crucial to know that advocacy work can be unpredictable. Remember, if you ever find yourself in an unsafe situation, feel overwhelmed, or lose your composure in the face of opposition, this is not your fault. Opponents often resort to manipulation, scare tactics, and other coercive strategies to further their agendas, and many have been doing so for much longer. Treat yourself and others with compassion, prioritize your well-being, and stay¹

^{1 |} But it is also important to follow specific rules and guidelines, such as obtaining the necessary passes to enter certain UN areas. Failure to comply with these regulations could result in consequences, such as being removed from the UN premises or having your badge revoked. In such instances, responsibility may fall on the individual.



A | ABOUT OFFLINE PREPARATIONS

Before the event, it's super important to think through your travel and accommodation plans to keep things safe and smooth. This section covers key tips like booking hotels close to the venue, coordinating flight times with others, and having pre-event meetings to boost everyone's security awareness. Taking these steps together can make a big difference in staying secure and feeling prepared!



Preferably, if the budget allows, fly out to settle in a day or two before the event starts. This would allow you to scan the environment, rest properly, identify safe spaces etc.

ACCOMODATION

Try to book accommodation in a nearby hotel visited or recommended by partners, and close to where the event is happening to lessen inconveniences, risk of being followed, mix-up of taxis, fatigue, far walking distances etc.

7 TRAVEL SAFETY

If you are travelling for the first time, connect with partners to ease anxieties and ensure safety. Think about using a buddy system

⇒Buddy system

the system where two individuals or pairs are assigned to look out for each other and provide support.

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AIRPORT LOGISTICS

Ease logistics including prenegotiated airport pick-ups for mental relief and less distraction at the airports where relevant and possible. If not, make sure to research what transportation you will be taking and its price.

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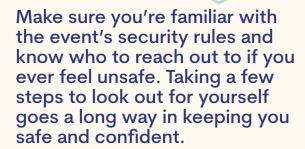


INTERNET ACCESS

If finances allow, purchase preloaded local sim cards or e-SIMs. This also allows you to connect from local lines instead of using unsecured wi-fi. Ensuring internet access is key for you to stay safe and connected.

06

EVENT SECURITY



07

VENUE ASSESSMENT

Before the event, take some time to check out the venue's security setup. Look for emergency exits, safe spots, and areas where you can avoid disruptions if things get tense. If you can't check it out yourself, ask a partner who's been there before to give you a quick rundown of the layout.

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SAFETY POLICIES

Make sure to check out your organization's safety and security policy if it's available. When working with a diverse group of advocates, it's important to make sure your safety plan is accessible to everyone, no matter their abilities or impairments.

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LOCAL ALLIANCES

Build alliances with local organizations, activists, and community leaders who share similar values. A strong support network can help during events and act as a buffer against opposition.

B / ONLINE PREPARATION (DIGITAL SECURITY GUIDELINES)

Before heading to an advocacy event, it's important to take steps to protect your digital security. This guide helps you keep your online presence safe before you get there. Cyber threats are just as real and harmful as physical ones

GENERAL TIPS

Before heading off to an international conference, it's a good idea to take a few extra steps to protect yourself online and stay low-key. First off, consider removing any recognizable stickers or logos from your laptop or devices and avoid wearing branded merchandise that might make you easy to identify. Keeping things neutral can help you blend in and stay safer.

EASY TIP



set up an "out of office" reply for your emails, but keep it super vague! You don't need to mention where you're going or when you'll be back—just keep it simple and brief for anyone outside your organization.

DEVICE SECURITY

- → Encourage the use of encrypted messaging apps like Signal for internal communications and advocacy groups. If possible, enable two-factor authentication on all devices and accounts.
- Regularly update software, apps, and operating systems to minimize vulnerabilities.
- Use strong, unique passwords for each account.
- Use reliable VPN services to secure internet connections, especially when accessing sensitive information.
- Beware of phishing attempts! Do not click on suspicious links or download attachments from unknown sources.
- → And don't forget to back up your important files regularly in a secure, offline spot. This way, even if something happens to your device, you won't lose crucial data. These small steps can make a big difference in staying safe and prepared as you get ready to make an impact on the world stage!



SOCIAL MEDIA AWARENESS

- Encourage staff to review and adjust the privacy settings on both personal and professional social media accounts. If it helps reduce stress, it's totally fine to make accounts private or even temporarily disable them — but that's completely up to you!
 - Try to find a balance that works for you. Social media visibility is an important advocacy and activism tool, and signaling your presence or activities can help you connect with others, create joint initiatives.
- → Consider posting less on social media about your plans in the week leading up to the event, especially on your private accounts. If you prefer, avoid sharing live updates about where you'll be during the forum. Remember, if you're tracking them, they're tracking you too.
- Set up a plan for how to handle negative or misleading posts on social media. It's important to have a coordinated response to push back against misinformation. Remember, not replying can also be a choice as long as everyone agrees on that approach.

About cyberthreats and reporting them

When it comes to cyber threats, it's important to stay on top of anything suspicious happening online. If you notice anything unusual or threatening, be sure to report it to your team right away and document everything – take screenshots of suspicious activities.

The protocol for handling these threats can vary from organization to organization, so it's a good idea to check in with your colleagues about the best steps to take. Using digital threat monitoring tools like Recorded Future or ThreatConnect can also help you stay aware of potential risks in real-time.

And if social media starts to feel overwhelming, don't hesitate to take a break — it's all about what makes you feel safe and comfortable. Protecting your mental space is just as important as protecting your digital one!

CH3

DURING THE EVENT KEEPING SAFE





ENSURING THE TEAM'S



Now that you've arrived at the event or on your trip, it's important to think about how you can stay safe and present. There are lots of ways to do this, and it really depends on who you are, your role, and what safety looks like for you personally. Creating a safe and supportive space for yourself and your team helps set the tone for a successful and collaborative advocacy experience.

We've put together some tips and things to keep in mind, but remember, safety is personal — and it's all about what works best for you:

Touch Points

Have daily breakfast touch points allies and people you already know for latest updates preferably outside venue of conference.

Communication

Have an **agreed 'safety' word** with the people you are travelling with so that you can communicate if feeling watched, followed or threatened in an opposition meeting.

Itinerary

Share each other's itinerary on Signal or WhatsApp to alert each other of whereabouts.

Updates

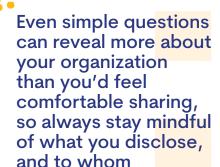
Appoint a media focal person to monitor pages of opposition groups online for threats, planned demos, targeted attacks against allies and provide updates on phone to team on ground.

Team

Spare a day for team bonding outside the international forum as this can be mentally taxing and a toxic space. Plan an excursion or city tour! Or just some downtime.

Sensitive info

Psychological manipulation has been around longer than this field, and it can be easier for tired staff to fall into. One real threat is when sensitive information gets pulled from you in person. It's easy to get caught up in casual conversations, over drinks or with new people, but it's important to stay cautious. Don't let the temptation of bonding over a drink lead you into sharing things you wouldn't normally talk about.



Wi-Fi

Avoid open Wi-Fi's or internet access.

Preferably a hotspot from your phone as it is safer.

Device

Never leave a device (phone or laptop) behind, even if you're just running to the bathroom or charging your phone.

Work

Resist the urge to do extra work outside of what's needed for the event. Avoid texting or catching up on emails during down time. When you do check your personal info, try to stay aware of your surroundings and the people around you. It's important to stay connected to what's going on around you!

Contact

When you do not feel comfortable, do not share your contacts/business cards with any new contacts met at the forum. Insist on taking theirs and intimating you will reach out.



Events like side panels, conferences, and advocacy forums can be incredibly inspiring, bringing together lots of advocates from all around the world, with diverse voices and ideas. However, without careful planning, they can also be stressful and unpredictable. Did you know that events with strong preparation can boost audience engagement by up to 40%? Planning ahead is not just about staying organized! With great planning comes spaces where everyone feels safe, heard, and ready to contribute. Here are some key tips to help you prepare for events.

MODERATORS

Appoint a strong moderator who knows about SRHR issues and is familiar with potential opposition or challenging audience members. This helps create a safer space for discussion. But it's also great to give a chance to first-timers! Give them a heads up and allow them to also prepare for potential opposition.

PARTICIPANTS

- → Educate participants about the risks of doxxing (publishing private or identifying info online). Encourage them to share only what's necessary and comfortable for the event.
- Hand out notes cards for audience members to write down questions, which the moderator can screen before sharing.
- Make sure participants are informed about the risks of attending (if there are big risks!) and that they can consent to this freely. It's important everyone knows what to expect.
- Implement an anonymous question submission system so participants can ask sensitive questions without fear of retaliation or judgment.

MATERIAL DISTRIBUTION

- Ensure that materials are well-researched, properly cited, and easily accessible.
- Only share materials you're comfortable making public.
 Remember, screenshots can be easily taken in a digital world, so be mindful of what's shared.

SESSION MANAGEMENT

- Minimize or completely block photography during sessions, as some people might take and share photos of pro-SRHR advocates online.
- → If photos are allowed, ensure all participants consent or can opt out. Use "No Photos" stickers to communicate this.
- Make sure your moderator or tech support has the tools to mute, remove, or block any disruptive participants in real-time. This helps keep the conversation focused and respectful for everyone involved.
- If responding to opposition questions, avoid repeating myths or misinformation. Always present facts and evidence that support SRHR.
- → Set clear rules at the start of the session so everyone knows how to engage without interrupting or derailing the conversation.
- Hold closed, invitation-only sessions for strategy discussions.
 Use public forums to share clear, practiced messages and powerful examples.
- Consider different formats and sessions! Public forums, conferences, and side events are great opportunities to raise awareness about SRHR and engage a wider audience. They allow people to learn more, ask questions, and get involved in the conversation.
- However, when it comes to strategy discussions, these should be kept closed and invitation-only. These sessions often involve sensitive information, so it's best to ensure only trusted allies are present.



Disruptions from opposition members can happen during any session, and while it's normal to feel thrown off, handling these situations with grace can be challenging. Sometimes, they might ask precise, 'respectful' questions that still feel like an attempt to divert the conversation, and other times, they might interrupt abruptly, making it harder not to react in the same way.

This section will give you techniques to manage both verbal and physical responses so you can stay centered, confident, and focused on advocating for SRHR. It's about maintaining control, not letting opposition derail your message, and using your body language and presence to keep the conversation on track.

On messaging, talking, interacting

- + You do not have to persuade one person who is fundamentally opposed to you and your topic for people attending to benefit from your presentation.
- + When interrupted, pause. Just because someone asks you a question does not mean you have to answer. If you don't know how to respond, then it is probably best not to give an answer.
 - > Alternatively, quickly suggest that they put it in the 'parking lot' to be answered at the end of your presentation. If you decide to answer, **be sure you are on message.**
 - Look to your neighbor: Another panelist or the moderator can diffuse or speak to the situation. You can also offer to direct the person to more information or a specialist colleague following the panel.

- + Sometimes accusations are directly aimed at a speaker or advocate, such as "You have blood on your hands." Stay calm—this person is trying to get a reaction out of you, you should not rise to the bait, although it is difficult.
 - > Ignore the personal attack and refer to the topic you are discussing. Try to find ways to return to your talking points.
 - > If you do engage, then respond objectively, without engaging in an emotional battle.
- + Focus on the positive aspects of your advocacy rather than solely critiquing the opposing viewpoint. Highlight the benefits of your position.
 - > Transition; helpful statements include: "People have diverse personal experiences with sexuality/pregnancy/abortion/sexual identity." "The important thing to remember is..."; and "Thank you for your observation."
 - Share personal anecdotes or stories that humanize your cause. Personal narratives can be powerful tools for connecting with others on an emotional level.
 - Emphasize values and principles commonly held between you and those with opposing views. This can create a sense of commonality.
- + Cite your own sources and arguments; do not take the bait to argue the credibility of studies or sources opposition groups cite in making inaccurate claims.



Refocus on your messages and arguments (eg: on the wellbeing of women and young people with access to quality information and services); repeat your messages and arguments.



Sometimes, safeguarding your space goes beyond words—it's also about how you carry yourself. Your body language, posture, and overall attitude can speak volumes, especially in moments of tension or when faced with opposition. This section will explore how to use your body to create a sense of presence and confidence, while also protecting your emotional well-being. It's not always easy to maintain composure, but being mindful of how you stand, move, and express yourself can help you stay grounded and assertive, even in challenging situations!

In general, when encountering new people or when you are in an advocacy event, try to keep your body language open and welcoming.

- → Make regular eye contact to convey confidence and sincerity but be mindful of maintaining a balanced gaze—too much can be perceived as confrontational.
- → A genuine smile can go a long way in creating a positive atmosphere. It helps to disarm tension and allows one to be perceived as friendly!
- → Subtly mirror the body language of the person you're speaking with. This can create a subconscious connection and make the interaction more comfortable.
- → Keep your tone moderate and avoid becoming overly aggressive or confrontational. A calm and steady voice can help maintain a constructive tone.
- → Use non-verbal cues, such as a firm handshake or a confident posture, to assert your presence without being confrontational.
- → If the person is not receptive and aggressive, then walk away and refer to the section below.

No matter where you find yourself, the authority to decide who enters your personal space or comes close to your body always resides with you. Ultimately, your bodily autonomy and boundaries take precedence over everything else. Therefore, if you face resistance in this regard, it's crucial to recognize that if any harm befalls you, it is not your fault.

If you directly encounter opposition:

Sometimes, opposition can come right up to you, either in your personal space or by cornering you in hallways or other public areas. It can be uncomfortable, but there are ways to handle these situations that prioritize your safety and well-being.

Here's how to keep yourself calm, set boundaries, and protect your space when facing direct confrontation (we know it's not always easy!):

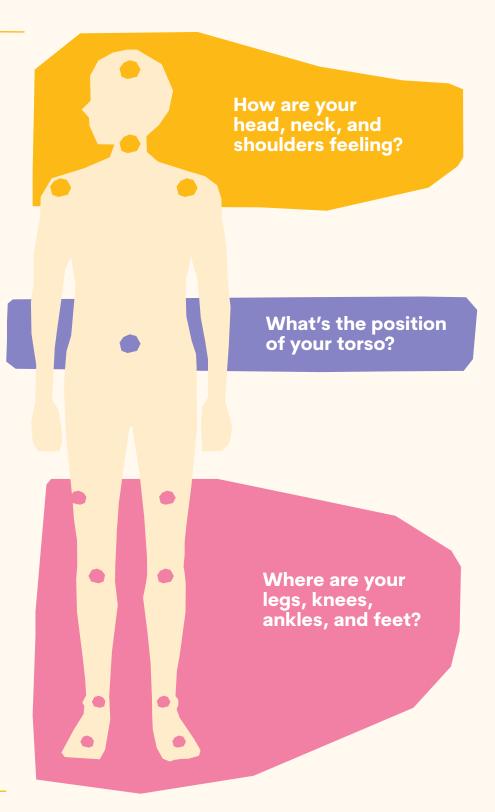
- Walk Away (It's OK to Walk Away): If things get uncomfortable, don't hesitate to walk away. Even if it feels awkward, walking away can be the best option, especially in hallways or public spaces. Find the nearest safe room, a familiar space, or head towards allies.
- Avoid Restrooms or Public Conference Rooms: Don't head to places where they might still follow you, like restrooms or common conference rooms, where it could be harder to escape the situation.
- Set Boundaries for Your Space: Politely but firmly communicate when someone's getting too close for comfort. Your personal space is important, and it's okay to make it clear when you feel uneasy.
- Stay in Well-Lit Areas: If you can, stay in well-lit, high-traffic areas. These spots are safer and can reduce the chances of confrontation.
- Be Aware of Your Surroundings: Stay alert and aware of what's happening around you. This will help you spot potential issues before they escalate.
- Stay Respectful: No matter how challenging it gets, avoid mocking or being aggressive in return. Stay calm and respectful—it can help defuse the situation.
- In General: Agree to Disagree: Sometimes, the best way forward is simply to agree to disagree and move on. Don't let someone's challenges pull you off course.



Take a moment to check in with your body and see how you're feeling. Where do you feel tension or pressure, and what does your body need to help release that stress? It could be a talk with someone, a good cry, a walk, or even just jumping around to shake it off.

Self-reflection can help you reset:

- Are you holding yourself in a way that feels typical for you, or are you in a new position?
- Are you expanding or shrinking in your posture?
- How do you feel in the way you're standing or sitting?



WHERE POSSIBLE MAKE TIME DURING EACH DAY TO RELEASE YOUR STRESS IN A WAY THAT FEELS MOST COMFORTABLE FOR YOU.

There are lots of ways to practice and improve your body language, and plenty of online resources—like videos and articles—that can help.

But here, we'll share a few techniques we've learned through trainings and from allies that might help you assert your body language in different situations.



Michelle Obama's 'Soft Fist' Technique:

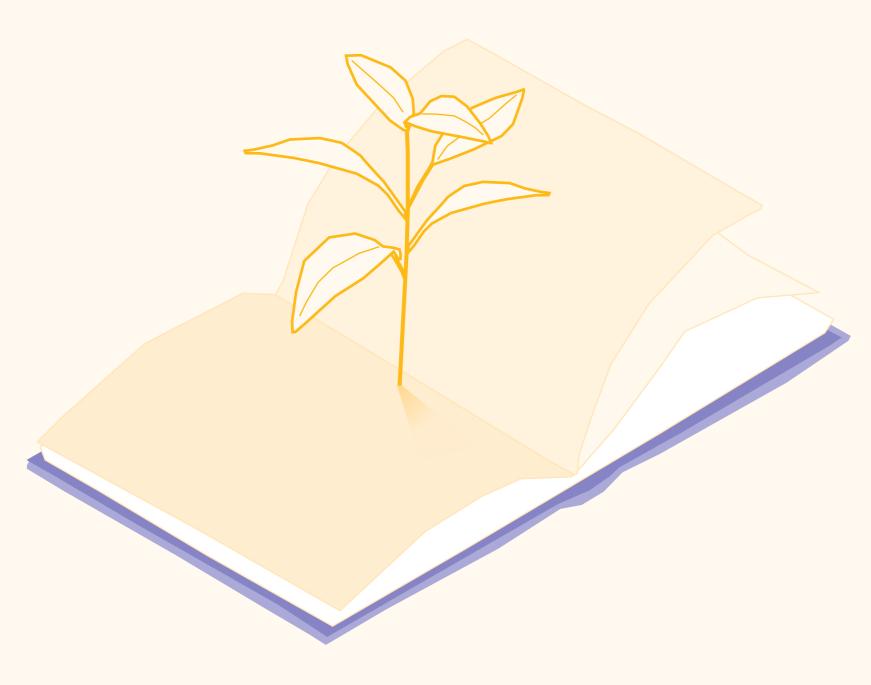
One thing Michelle Obama is known for is using a 'soft fist' when shaking hands. Instead of a traditional handshake, she often offers a gentle fist for the other person to bump. This technique helps create a connection while respecting personal space, making things more comfortable for both parties.

Michelle Obama's Elbow Placement:

Another technique she uses is placing her hand lightly on the elbow of the person she's shaking hands with. This creates a bit of distance, while still allowing for the gesture of a handshake. It's a way to keep the interaction respectful but less intimidating—especially when long handshakes might feel uncomfortable or overpowering (like the ones often used by people like Trump).

Put Yourself in Their Shoes: Finally, if you're feeling intimidated or uncomfortable, try to mirror the body language of the person who's making you feel this way. This technique can help disarm tense situations and give you a better sense of control. Try to 'humanize' the person: ask yourself why they might be acting the way they are. Could they be feeling insecure, or are they just having a bad day?

These are just a few techniques to practice, but there's a lot more out there to explore. The key is to feel empowered in your own body language so you can navigate tricky situations with confidence.



CH4

AFTER THE EVENT

After any event, it's important to take a moment to reflect on the whole experience. Did you have fun? Were you mostly stressed? Did you make meaningful connections?

Think about what went well, what you achieved, and also what you could have done differently. This reflection not only helps you grow but also sets you up for even better experiences in your future as an advocate. The most important thing is to learn, and to move forward!

Here are some of our tips, and rituals, for post-event reflections:

- → Take a moment to rest, release your stress and listen to your body and any emotions coming up. Going to these spaces is draining and so whatever emotions you have are allowed to express. You can release them, by for example, journaling, going for a walk, talking to a friend or colleague about your experience or even a good homemade meal.
 - + Checking in with your body can look different for everyone, and it's important to find what works for you. While practices like meditation (you can explore apps like Insight Timer or Calm, or find guided sessions on YouTube) and yoga can be really helpful, they're not the only options. Sometimes, simply closing your eyes and asking yourself what your body is feeling in the moment can be just as effective. Whether it's through movement, stillness, or another practice, the key is to listen to your body and give it the attention it needs to process and release tension.
- → A week after the event (and after you rested!), hold a reflection session with your team—whether that's peers, staff, or partners who were there. Talk about what happened, share what you saw, and document any incidents or tactics used by opposition.
 - + It's also important to stay flexible and ready to adjust as opposition tactics change. Keep updating your security and advocacy strategies based on what you've learned and any new challenges that come up.
- After the event, it's important to do a digital debrief to look at everything that happened online—this includes social media interactions, digital footprints, and how people were reacting. This helps you reflect and build stronger digital strategies for the future.

AN IMPORTANT FINAL NOTE ON MENTAL HEALTH, SELF-CARE & INTERNATIONAL SPACES

In high-stress environments like international advocacy events, it's just as important to prioritize your mental health and well-being as it is to focus on security. But well-being isn't one-size-fits-all—it means different things to different people, and we should think critically about what care really means. It's not just about individual self-care, but also about community care and creating spaces where everyone feels supported. Self-care isn't just a solo journey; it's plural, collective, and it should challenge the usual, often Westernized ways of thinking about wellness.

So, while we'll share some simple mental health tips to help you navigate these spaces, remember that taking care of yourself is about understanding what works for you—and that might involve leaning on others or thinking about well-being in an alternative way.

Here is some beginner, easy mental health tips that can help you navigate the space:

Seek out connections with other advocates. Share your experiences, offer support, and lean on each other during challenging times.

Remember, you're not alone in this.

Remember to take breaks when you need them. Step away from the event for a moment to rest, recharge, and engage in activities that bring you joy and relaxation.

- Be realistic about what you can handle. You don't have to do everything or be everywhere.
- Be gentle with yourself and practice self-compassion.

 Acknowledge your efforts and recognize that it's okay to take care of your mental health.
- Don't hesitate to reach out for support if you're feeling overwhelmed.

 Take advantage of on-site counselors (if available), friends, colleagues or hotlines if you need someone to talk to.
- Find a balance between your advocacy work and other aspects of your life.
- Incorporate physical activity into your routine to reduce stress and boost your mood.

 Take short walks, get some fresh air, stretch, or engage in other forms of exercise to support your mental well-being.
- by staying hydrated and nourished. Eat balanced meals and drink plenty of water to maintain your energy levels throughout the event.
- Take time to celebrate your achievements, no matter how small they may seem. Recognize the positive impact you're making through your advocacy efforts and give yourself credit for your contributions to the cause! You are doing a lot!

ON ACCESSIBILITY SAFETY & SECURITY

When attending international events, it's essential to ensure they are truly accessible to everyone. Accessibility goes beyond just providing ramps or captions—it's about creating environments where all individuals, regardless of ability, can participate fully and feel safe.

While all the tips and strategies outlined in this toolkit apply to everyone, we wanted to take a moment to specifically address some points related to the unique challenges faced by young activists with disabilities. Whether you're an organizer looking to make events more inclusive or a young person advocating for your own needs, this section is focused on the physical, digital, and emotional safety of activists with disabilities.

By considering these important factors, we can work together to create spaces that support and empower all voices, ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate, advocate, and contribute meaningfully to discussions.

Before the Event:

- → Organizers' Role: Organizers need to step up and ensure that venues are truly accessible and that their agenda reflects a commitment to inclusivity. This means not only choosing a venue that is physically accessible but also considering the needs of participants with disabilities when planning the event's schedule and activities.
- → Understanding Your Needs: Before the event, make sure to communicate your accessibility needs with the organizers. Whether it's a specific support person, assistive devices, or any accommodations you require, being proactive can make a huge difference. It's also important to make sure your voice is heard.
- Preparing Your Space: If you need rest or recharge spaces, or quiet areas to decompress, let the organizers know ahead of time. It's okay to ask for help navigating spaces and requesting specific accommodations before you arrive to make the experience more comfortable for you.

At the Event:

→ Navigating the Venue: Look out for accessible maps, braille signage, or audio directions to guide you through the venue. Some events also have trained staff or volunteers who can help with navigation—don't hesitate to ask for support. Remember, oftentimes, the design of venues can make it harder to get around, so rely on others or ask for extra assistance when needed, or to prevent being targeted or cornered by opposition.

- → Accessible Communication: If you need sign language interpretation, captions, or any other form of accessible communication, be sure to inform the organizers in advance. Events should be inclusive, and the organizers should be ready to provide these services for you.
- → Peer Support Networks: Form or join support groups or buddy systems to navigate challenges together. Having allies who understand your needs and can offer emotional support throughout the event can make all the difference.
- → Know Your Rights: Inform yourself on the international and local policies protecting people with disabilities, like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This will help you feel empowered to advocate for yourself and others when faced with accessibility barriers.
- → Inclusive Event Planning: Involve people with disabilities in the planning process to make sure their needs are taken into account. Whether it's for accommodations or ensuring spaces are accessible, it's vital to listen and act on the feedback of those who are directly impacted.

On Cybersecurity and Digital Safety:

- → Digital Accessibility: Ensure that all online platforms—such as registration portals and event apps—comply with accessibility standards like WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). This ensures that digital resources are usable by all, regardless of ability. If not, provide alternative ways to register or support.
- → Secure and Easy-to-Use Tools: Organizers should provide easy access to secure cybersecurity tools that are accessible, like screen reader-compatible password managers and apps that are easy to navigate.

After the Event:

→ Feedback and Improvement: After the event, organizers should actively seek feedback from participants, especially those with disabilities, to understand how accessible and inclusive the event was. This can be done through digital forms, one-on-one conversations, or any other method that suits the participant. It's important that organizers are open to hearing about any challenges people faced, whether related to physical access, digital tools, or emotional well-being. Based on the feedback, organizers should evaluate what worked and what didn't, and make necessary changes for future events to ensure better accessibility and inclusion!

