HOW TO STAY SAFE ONLINE

'This book is the knowledge that gives you power' **Dr Shola Mos-Shogbamimu, author and activist**

A Digital Self-Care Toolkit for Developing Resilience and Allyship

SEYI AKIWOWO

LIFE

How to Stay Safe Online

'Seyi Akiwowo's work to make the online world safer, especially for Black women, is not only powerful, it's necessary'
Nova Reid, anti-racism activist and author of *The Good Ally*

'Seyi Akiwowo is a force of nature and this book is a godsend. She exposes the depth and urgency of the online abuse crisis, explores the hypocrisy and inefficacy of tech companies and government, and explains what readers can do to improve their online lives. Accessible, empowering and potentially life-changing, this is a book everyone should read'
Laura Bates, author of *Men Who Hate Women* and *Girl Up*, and founder of the Everyday Sexism Project

'I wish the Internet was a safer place, but until that day comes, this helpful book is a crucial companion. How wonderful to have Seyi on our side as we navigate through the stormy seas of the online world which she, sadly, knows all too well. The brilliant tools in this book will help you set better boundaries, protect your mental health, be a better digital citizen, and in general look after ourselves and each other'
Emma Gannon, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Multi-Hyphen Method*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seyi Akiwowo is the founder of Glitch, a UK charity making digital spaces safe for all by ending online abuse. Before setting up Glitch, Seyi was elected as the youngest Black female councillor in east London at the age of twenty-three.

A graduate of the London School of Economics, Seyi spoke on 'Fixing the Glitch' at TedxLondon in 2019 and appeared on *Wired's* front cover as their top Changemaker of 2021.

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To Oluwaseyi Akiwowo, the seven-year-old girl who had to grow up fast to survive a cruel world, and to twenty-six-year-old Seyi, who weathered a dark and scary storm of online abuse.

We are now thriving!
x

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Introduction

Picture this: it's an early morning in February. A young Black woman is on a treadmill, pleased with herself for still being committed to her New Year's resolution. After she takes an obligatory #gymselfie at the very same leisure centre where she learned to swim and took part in secondary-school PE, she puts in the earphones connected to her phone and presses play on her gym playlist. The next song up is a club banger, 'Work' by Rihanna (featuring Drake). But, strangely, the song keeps dipping in and out. Confused and distracted, the young woman pauses the treadmill. She picks up her phone to investigate, ready to complain that her Spotify Premium subscription isn't providing a premium service at all. She freezes. A crushing wave of panic and then denial crashes over her as she watches a waterfall of notifications cascade down the screen. She manages to catch some of the previews:

*'Ni**a.'*
'A talking ape?'
'Which STD will end your miserable life?'
*'Ni**eress.'*
'I hope you get lynched you nog.'
'Slit your clitoris.'
'hahahahahaha eat shit'

The leisure centre – until moments ago a place full of joyful childhood memories – feels immediately unsafe. She looks around, panicking, unsure of who to speak to, who can help, unclear of what

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to do next, all while frantically wondering what she has even done wrong.

That young Black woman is me.

I wish I could say this is the plot of a Netflix drama I've made up to help you better understand the impact of online abuse. But it isn't. It's a snippet of my story. I was elected as East London's youngest Black female councillor in 2014, and this – my first unprepared reckoning with online patriarchy and white supremacy – happened three years later. A video of my speech at the European Parliament had gone viral, and with that attention I became the subject of people's unfiltered hatred. I experienced very real, very serious threats to my safety and well-being. The cold and lonely sense of powerlessness was overwhelming. After that painful experience, I ambitiously (and naively) began campaigning to hold tech giants accountable for the millions of women facing or fearing online abuse.

Like most people thrown into the dark side of the internet, I was largely ill-equipped to handle it. My loved ones didn't know what to do or how best to support me. They made well-meaning suggestions to delete my account or make it private, rather than focusing on what was – and still is – a massive, systemic and global problem: online abuse. One that's going ignored or is actively swept under the rug by social media platforms. One that is nowhere near the top of the political agenda, despite the significant impact online abuse has on democracy, social cohesion, security, human rights and people's well-being.

I became a survivor of online violence at a time when there was even less support than there is now for those finding themselves in my situation, let alone a young Black woman with a confident voice. The poor response from society, law enforcement and other people in politics was to say:

'Bear with it.'
'It's part of the job, just ignore it.'
'This is what it's like to be a woman in public life.'

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My story is just one in a sea of millions. This abuse is pervasive and happens in every corner of the internet, and yet there's little help for victims. Step one of solving this is to equip ourselves and those around us with knowledge and support, and to reimagine our experiences online and with each other – and this book aims to provide you with those tools.

The prevalence and impact of online abuse

Online abuse happens far more than it should. And far more often than a lot of people realize: almost half of internet users in the US have personally experienced online harassment, with 27 per cent reporting to have experienced severe forms such as physical threats, sexual harassment, stalking and sustained harassment. According to Amnesty International, it happens to a woman every thirty seconds on Twitter alone, and according to the United Nations, women globally are twenty-seven times more likely to be harassed online than men.

Online abuse towards women – which falls under the umbrella of online gender-based violence (OGBV), which also includes the violent experiences that non-binary, trans and intersex communities face – is an extension of the offline, and too often physical violence many women disproportionately face. But, sadly, the data is still limited. When experts talk about online violence, they are often narrowly focused on the cyberbullying of young people. It's as if somehow – magically – we develop superpowers and are no longer susceptible to online bullying after our eighteenth birthday. Or they use language that prioritizes a limited, masculine, heterosexual, white-privileged viewpoint, which both erases and 'others' the experiences of minoritized communities.

By letting these experts shape the conversations, we overlook forms of abuse that affect a diverse range of people, and totally bypass the nuance of their experiences. We end up ignoring Black

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women, who experience misogynoir (a combination of anti-Blackness and misogyny). We fail to understand what trans people feel when they face specific forms of abuse such as intentional misgendering and deadnaming. And those with disabilities are completely ignored in the development of new multimedia products on social media, like audio chat rooms, or having to witness people laughing at visible disabilities in viral memes or GIFs.

We also tend to see online abuse through the lens of celebrities, but by focusing on them we're glossing over the fact that online abuse affects everyday people and communities in much more insidious ways – people who don't have the resources or platform to find support and justice in the same way famous people can. Not to lessen the experiences of celebrities, but we have to recognize how this issue affects victims of all backgrounds, especially those with limited social and cultural capital. Which is why this book focuses on equipping the most marginalized in our communities – and making sure no one gets left behind.

My anger, my desire to make change, and my sometimes-helpful stubbornness in refusing to accept this as the status quo are why I set up Glitch. My goal is to end online abuse. I want to help knock down the barriers that prevent women and marginalized people from speaking their truth, engaging in debate and having the careers they desire. Glitch is a UK-based charity that raises awareness of the long-lasting effects of online abuse, advocating for systemic change and legislative reform, while empowering thousands of women and members of minoritized communities to navigate the online space happily and safely.

The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated the problem. As CEO of Glitch, and in partnership with the End Violence Against Women Coalition, I launched a nationwide survey – and the results, based on nearly five hundred responses, found that almost half (46 per cent) of respondents experienced online abuse during the first lockdown in 2020, and a third of these said the abuse was worse

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than in previous years. Black and minoritized women and non-binary people experienced higher levels of abuse, were more likely to change their behaviours as a result, and were more likely to feel their complaints to social media platforms were not adequately addressed.

A rise in online abuse is stifling freedom of expression and joy, and is causing harm on a mass scale. This book doesn't see or frame online abuse in opposition to freedom of expression, but rather believes that those who are disproportionately affected by online abuse deserve to have their human rights protected too.

Our online spaces are continually being hijacked and weaponized by bad actors, with technology reproducing and magnifying all the inequalities we see offline. And the impact? An exodus of women leaving the online space because they feel unsafe. A generation who knows the immense power of the internet, yet feels ill-equipped or hesitant to fully embrace it. People of marginalized genders who are told they must tolerate online abuse as it's 'simply part of the job'. Young girls who grow up to believe the internet's polarity and toxicity are normal. Parents who are fearful of their children being online, and loved ones who are confused about how to provide support and who might unintentionally victim-blame.

Alongside calling for long-term systemic change, as the founder of Glitch, I develop and deliver training programmes and workshops for women and non-binary people so they can stay safe online. This gives us useful intel and data on how people are navigating the online space, their experiences, the different forms of online abuse, and how tactics are evolving – enabling us to continue to advocate for change that will actually help.

All of the work the Glitch team and I have put in over the last few years has helped thousands of people around the world, as well as helping me to develop a go-to toolkit for digital self-care. But it has also been a stark reminder of how much work there is still to do in order to tackle online abuse. The message needs to be loud and clear: online abuse is never okay!

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Why is this book needed?

So much has gone into highlighting the need to make women feel safe offline without putting the sole responsibility on their shoulders. We have been pushing back against victim-blaming language – the kind that says what a woman wears or drinks affects her validity as a victim. But online, we remain megabytes behind. Victims of online abuse are exactly that: victims. Rather than addressing the real problem – a tech culture that's fatally flawed – we're told we are the problem.

I want to stress that, although this book focuses on my experiences as a Black woman online – and although the majority of statistics available are based on cis middle-class women in the Global North – this does not at all negate the experiences of other minoritized groups. This book is for all marginalized genders (and allies). I hope the data presented in these pages, as well as the diverse experiences and wisdom recounted by experts from many backgrounds, will provide you with a small window into what being safe online means – and what it requires – for minoritized and multi-intersecting identities that are systemically oppressed in our society.

This book collates the lived experiences, advice and painful lessons I and some of my nearest and dearest have learned over the last ten years – from those in my global professional network to some of my closest friends at home. These include activists, founders of global and small NGOs, journalists, former politicians and fellow survivors. The hope is that, by sharing these insights, fewer people – especially women – will have to fear and endure the emotional, physical and sometimes financial turmoil of online abuse first-hand.

Introducing digital self-care

Through Glitch, I've been developing the system and frameworks I wish I'd had in those darkest moments of online abuse. This book

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gives me an opportunity to pass on essential resources and lessons to those who need them right now.

Digital self-care is about understanding the realities of the online world and the many consequences we're facing while we're currently being let down by the systems in place. We can't implement online boundaries if we don't know what we're defending ourselves from. We need this knowledge to equip, prepare, and set personal boundaries for ourselves – while also taking steps, both big and small, to make others' online experiences safer and more joyful too. Not to mention educating ourselves on how and why we should continue to hold tech companies and governments accountable. And, finally, digital self-care is a healthy way to address the aftermath of violence and trauma. A way to kick-start our healing and salvage our relationship with the online space.

Throughout this book, we'll dive into a range of topics related to digital self-care – such as digital citizenship and safety. For so long, women have been conditioned to serve others before ourselves: to put our own needs on the back burner while denying ourselves play, joy and self-expression. Digital self-care and self-defence is saying 'enough is enough'.

This book will help you to understand the different layers of online abuse and how they appear. When we can recognize perpetrators and their typical behaviours, we take back our agency. The purpose of this conversation isn't to make you feel shit, or depressed about the state of the world, or make you retreat offline. Quite the opposite. With the right knowledge and skills, you can gain confidence and experience joy, both online and offline.

How to use this book

The book is divided into two sections. In the first four chapters, we'll build our foundation of knowledge – understanding what online abuse is, recognizing its many forms and learning who the key players are.

Then we'll move on to your **digital self-care toolkit**: the

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actionable insights you can take with you into every single online experience moving forward. These include strategies to keep yourself happy and safe online, tips on stepping up your digital security, and advice on how to be a better digital ally in your online and offline communities. If you are currently experiencing online abuse or know someone who is, flip to Chapter Five for actionable advice you can use now.

The final chapter of this book discusses my own reflections, milestones and mistakes – these are included with the intention of transparency, and to help dismantle the rigid perfectionism that is an integral part of white supremacy culture. Not only does it force all of us to (over)work to impossible standards, it also makes us feel like we are never able to make a mistake. This is cancerous to feminist and liberation movements, and on an individual level it can lead to guilt, shame and eventual burnout. The last chapter captures an aspect of a very active journey I am on now and will always be on – unlearning. As Audre Lorde famously said: 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.'

This book shouldn't need to exist. Tech companies could have eradicated much of the problem a decade ago. Instead they are reproducing and sometimes exacerbating the same inequalities, the same harms and the same biases we see offline. (The fact user safety wasn't a priority for the vast majority of tech creation is a whole other issue and another conversation.)

We're now at a tipping point. Year on year, we're seeing an increasing number of what I call 'glitches' online: violations of human rights, examples of gender inequality, and threats to democracy. Glitches that are preventing both the internet and us from fulfilling our potential.

Who is this book for?

If you're one of the millions of women who've already experienced online abuse (probably more than once, as statistics tell us), felt

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isolated and were forced to blame yourself, I hope this book provides some comfort. I hope you feel seen and heard and that the information in these pages equips your community to better support you. I hope you understand that what happened or is happening to you is 100 per cent wrong, and I hope that the digital self-care toolkit lessens the burden of knowing what you need to do next. I hope you'll pick this book up whenever you need a shoulder to cry on, or a pep talk and a strategy to get back online.

This book also seeks to be a helpful guide for anyone looking to support someone else. You could be a parent, teacher, sibling, employer, agent, publicist or friend who wants to know how you can be there for someone who is starting to build their online presence but is fearful, or someone going through online abuse. If you don't understand why they're still online, or why it's impacting them so much, this book will provide insights into what they're experiencing. It contains the wisdom, boundaries and commitment to self-care I wish I'd had at age twenty-seven when I first received online abuse. And how awesome would it be if some of you were also inspired to join the mission of tech accountability? If we don't all play our parts as digital citizens, our online spaces will continue to be used against us.

We all need to hold ourselves accountable. I'm no exception to this. One of the biggest lessons to learn is that the line between perpetrators and victims is often blurred. We need to be continuously mindful of who we speak to online and how we speak to them. We need to be more compassionate about how we use our platforms. How can we post with greater empathy for those on our platflorms? How should we respond when witnessing online abuse happening to someone else? How can we better shape social norms, both online and offline? How can we *all* become better digital citizens?

Reversing the prevalence and damage of violence online will take a collective effort, and far more than this book can achieve on its own. But I hope that the following pages will make you think more about what we can all be doing every day to make our online spaces

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safer. I also encourage you to share your learnings with those closest to you. Opening up and having these conversations is how we can slowly build up our armour and defend ourselves and others against online abuse as a wider society.

Our online communities require as much attention and care as our offline ones do. As digital citizens, it is our responsibility to **be the change we want to see**.

So let's get started.

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Chapter One: Why this book shouldn't need to exist

The developers of these apps are well rested billionaires who participate in the leisure life. We arguing with strangers on here and the rent still due.

The Nap Ministry, Twitter, August 2021

One of my biggest pet peeves is victim-blaming language. Perhaps this stems from unresolved trauma that I need to add to my growing list of 'topics to take to therapy'. But phrases like 'Don't feed the trolls' and 'Just ignore it' are irritating and so incredibly unhelpful.

On Christmas Eve in 2018, I was reporting an online stalker to the police shortly after publishing an article about Meghan Markle and – ironically – online abuse. Do you know what the officer then said to me? 'Well, if you made your account private and didn't write these things, this wouldn't happen.' Um, thanks?!

It saddens me, because it absolves the people in power of actually having to do anything. All the responsibility is piled on women and other vulnerable people to make themselves safe and avoid online abuse. Which is bollocks. I'd bet you my entire collection of Adele merchandise that even the most careful women minding their own business are still abused. Black, bold, proud women being themselves are forced to battle an onslaught of abuse just because of their profile pictures. New mothers posting about their experiences of motherhood on forums or even on their own social media accounts have been painfully attacked. Women can post on almost

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any topic – animal rights, climate change, healthcare – and abuse usually follows.

As a result, women are 'advised' not to talk about controversial topics. At best that's a subjective and unhelpful piece of advice that means we are apparently supposed to avoid talking about bodily autonomy, period equity or the gender pay gap. Yet a man can discuss these things on social media and be adored and avoid the abusive terrain women have to traverse. At worst, this 'advice' is a heteronormative silencing tool around the topics of the liberation of marginalized communities and social justice. And any topic discussed as *insert minoritized identity* is seen as controversial by virtue of the person being from *insert minoritized community*. This isn't right, but it is the reality and it's why this book is needed.

It's time we start countering this narrative that it's a woman's fault she's experiencing online abuse. Or a trans person's. Or a disabled person's. It's not the victim's fault, and it's also not their sole responsibility to make the necessary changes to eradicate the abuse. It's **everyone's** responsibility.

Offline and online abuse

I'm not anti-tech. To be honest, it's sexist framing to call passionate women campaigners 'tech naysayers'. It's an old tactic, and it's getting boring.

Ever since the 2000s, I've always been a big lover of the internet and new tech. The passion I – and others like me – have for the potential of the internet is why we do what we do. Just think about all the good it can accomplish. The people we can connect with around the world. The lessons we can learn from some seemingly random blogger or vlogger. How we can educate ourselves and learn new terms and even entire languages. The new careers we can pursue. All through the World Wide Web. Many people have even

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found love and companionship there. It's how I met my boyfriend – through the dating app Hinge. Social media alone has allowed me to make a positive impact on others, and them on me.

But for all the good it has provided us, the internet has also brought a mountain of avoidable harms. And that's because it doesn't exist in a vacuum. What we see happening online is a continuation of offline violence, and if you follow this path it almost always leads back to the patriarchy. We live in a patriarchal, heteronormative world – so how can we expect the internet to be any different? It's impossible to separate OGBV from its offline counterpart, as each feeds into the other. The systems that currently hold women down offline don't magically disappear online; the shadow of the patriarchy hangs over the digital space too. Racism and white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and all other forms of bigotry exist as part of a continuum that exists both online and offline.

So, while I love technology, if we're going to talk about online safety and accountability, we're also going to have to acknowledge the offline conditions exacerbating the problem. Part of it is a lack of education about the systemic issues that affect us. Relationship and sex education (RSE) was only recently made mandatory in the UK but is key to teaching teenagers what healthy, respectful, consensual relationships are, and what crosses the line into the inappropriate. Our political education is compromised by our heavily colonized curriculums. And there's a real absence of open, transparent dialogue surrounding racism, sexism and other examples of systemic oppression. These offline educational shortcomings all contribute to what we see and experience online, and this is why they're so important to be aware of.

Similarly, OGBV is inseparable from the rights of women and those outside the gender binary. What we're seeing play out online is nothing new. Historically, our rights have always lacked the attention, care, investment and resources they deserve. Governments

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aren't investing enough in programmes and services to combat gender-based violence, and we don't have the laws and policies needed to support anti-discrimination efforts offline. This means online platforms are left to replicate the problems we've seen and heard offline a million times over.

I spoke to Hera Hussain, founder of Chayn – an online volunteer community that creates intersectional and multilingual resources for survivors of gender-based violence globally, and works to improve the online experience of those seeking support. She put it simply: 'We're all victims of the same issue. Even the perpetrators themselves are victims of patriarchy. Because people aren't born with the textbook of toxic masculinity and rape culture. We absorb it from the environment and we pass it around in our interactions with people. We're all victims of patriarchy and that's why it's so endemic and hard to spot. And then when you start unravelling the different threads, it pops up in the most unexpected places, as well as the most obvious ones.'

What I do think is avoidable is the scale at which we're seeing harms occur across the globe. Abusive content can easily be shared across platforms, allowing it to proliferate at speed and making it difficult to contain. It's the reach, speed, amplification and permanence of abusive content online that makes it distinct from offline abuse.

Laura Bates, writer and founder of the Everyday Sexism Project, explained how online spaces are the perfect home for all sorts of toxic and damaging behaviours and perspectives: 'Of course, people point out that the internet is revealing to us existing forms of hatred that have always been there. And I agree with that, I think that's true, but I also think that it doesn't only reflect back what's there, it also exacerbates it in a number of different ways. It provides ideal conditions for abuse that aren't available in the physical world. For example, a direct line to female public figures or politicians, where people can access them so much more easily. That's new. An echo

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