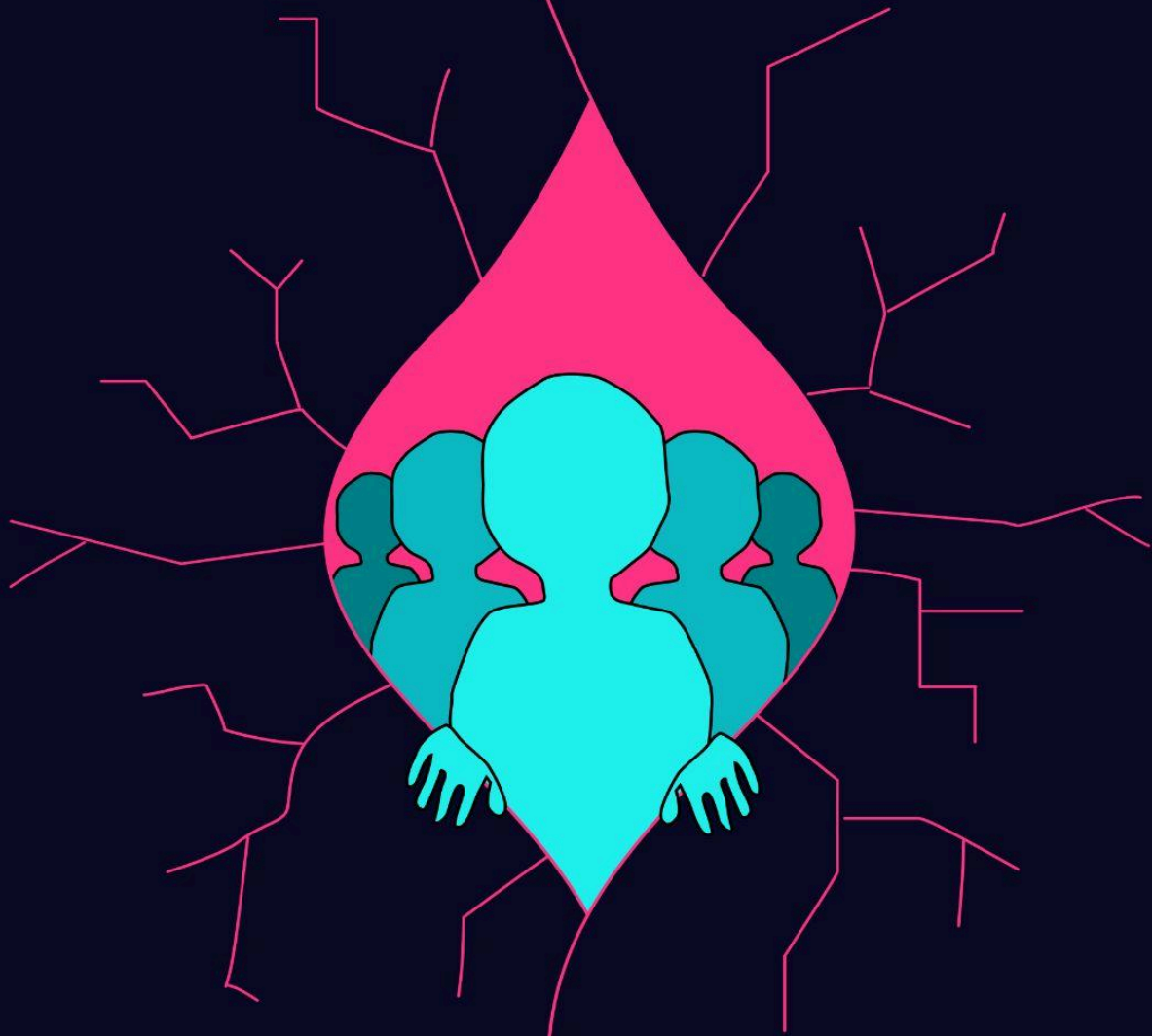


# Unveiling: The Invisible Lives of TikTok Data Workers in London



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## **Preface**

In this report we will delve into the lived experiences of TikTok data workers in London, United Kingdom. The term “data work” is commonly used to define the roles of content moderators, trust and safety workers and quality analysts who serve as the backbone of social media companies' operation systems.

Content moderators serve as the guardians of the social media platform by removing and filtering harmful contents while trust and safety workers directly interact with users in danger, take safety measures to save lives and protect users from dangers such as self harm and suicide, while quality analysts ensure accurate platform's community guidelines.

This report draws on interviews with current and former moderators whose names have been changed for safety reasons. Their testimonies reveal the human cost behind platform safety.

This report was written before the mass layoffs of TikTok's trust and safety workers in August 2025.

Eleven TikTok data workers in London were interviewed for this report, which assesses the reality of such jobs, including working conditions, and the implications and effects of the job on their wellbeing. The data workers themselves share their lived experiences in their own words. I would like to thank the interviewees for trusting me with their stories.

### **Trigger Warning**

This report discusses unpleasant events, graphic content, depictions of violence and abuse. Therefore, readers' discretion is advised.



## Introduction

Doomscrolling has become a normal daily habit of the 21st century. People spend several hours glued to their phone screens or other devices every day, jumping from content to content, one social media platform to the next and interacting with users or merely scrolling mindlessly.

TikTok is one of the world's most widely used social media platforms with approximately 22 billion users globally. TikTok was initially launched on September 20, 2016 in China under the name "Douyin". It was later rebranded into TikTok in August 2018 after the parent company ByteDance merged with the short video app [Musical.ly](#).

TikTok gained popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Currently, it has over 2.2 billion users globally and more than 30 million users in the UK. There are over 1.5 million British businesses on TikTok according to Oxford Economics' [research findings](#). The UK is TikTok's largest market in Europe.

According to data from [Exploding Topics](#), the amount of daily time spent on TikTok has increased twofold since 2019. TikTok users spend an average of at least one hour on the platform each day, which equates to approximately 6% of the average person's waking hours. The report disclosed that an average person spends 34 hours and 56 minutes on the app each month, which includes 22% of US teenagers who spend two to three hours a day on the platform. As of April 2025, the average time spent on TikTok per visit is 15 minutes and 41 seconds, which means people use TikTok approximately 15.4 times each day.

Consequently, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of videos are actively shared nonstop by TikTok users from across the world. And unfortunately these vast amounts of videos and images may not always be pleasing to the eye or the mind. In fact, social media is like a digital public toilet where the depth of the internet's nastiness is broadcast.

A [report](#) published by French members of parliament in September 2025 described TikTok as an "ocean of harmful content" and a "slow poison" that is risking the lives of many underage users. The commission further expressed concern and called for a criminal inquiry into TikTok being an "unhappiness factory" and its risks and effects on children and young adults.



Given this and many other factors, it's impossible to imagine social media without active moderation and frequent monitoring by human data workers who tirelessly filter out harmful content, making sure society is protected from danger and online risks.

## **The invisible work force**

Behind every short video scroll lies a hidden workforce tasked with reviewing harmful content uploaded to TikTok. The role of the data workers, including content moderators, trust and safety workers and quality assurance/policy analysts, is to serve as TikTok's frontline safeguards, ensuring platform safety and integrity by detecting and removing harmful content, such as hate speech, disinformation, fraud, scams and deepfake toxicity with the help of automated systems.

TikTok content moderators review every possible digital image and video from all possible angles, sifting through reams of negative content and experiencing emotional turmoil as part of their job to protect users. Trust and safety workers identify and tag underage users, doing life-saving tasks such as helping users exposed to potential suicide and self-harm triggers and other online risks.

In addition, data workers are also behind the development of what TikTok call "artificial intelligence", navigating through millions of videos each day until the correct outcome is produced to equip, correct and train the automated detection systems. However, the often-traumatising digital labour that these workers experience goes unnoticed and unrecognized by big tech companies, and is conveniently absent from their marketing. These workers often face exploitation, unfair working conditions, mental health detriment from the job, tension and uncertainty about their contracts resulting from the company's unfair labour practices.

## **How things started**

In 2018, Bytedance opened its London office in order to grow the platform. Eventually, moderators there would work in more than 70 market languages. Among them were English, French, German, Italian, Hebrew, Arabic, Dutch, Sub-Saharan African languages and more. TikTok often hires people who speak multiple languages to cut costs.

Khalid, whose name changed for this report, was among the first hires for his language market. According to him, Portuguese moderators with little to no language proficiency,



other than Portuguese, used to work on Khalid's language and other language markets using translation tools until TikTok hired native speaking moderators for those markets.

“I started working at TikTok around five years ago, at the height of its rapid growth during the Covid pandemic,” Khalid says. “Initially I joined as a content moderator for my home country’s market, mostly working with that language content. After a while, the in-house moderation team for my language was shut down, and operations were handed over to BPOs or business processing outsourcing external contractors, many of them based in Portugal. As a result, we were moved to live moderation, still based on our native language skills. That lasted for a few months before that, too, was outsourced. Eventually, we were reassigned to the English live moderation team, and I began moderating live videos in English.”

TikTok moderators may start their day with benign videos such as people dancing or doing a trending lipsync challenge, then suddenly see disturbing content, like beheadings, child abuse, suicide or self-harm.

Sofia, whose name is changed for this report, is originally from another country ( not disclosed for her safety) outside of the UK. She came to the United Kingdom for education. She graduated and came across an agency job for native speakers in her language. She went through three interviews, including a psychological assessment of her resistance to stressful events. She then got hired as a moderator.

“I didn’t know what I was expecting about the job, this was five years ago,” says Sofia. “My two weeks of training was mostly about policy, and then when I went live it was expected that my job was to review one thousand videos a day; videos that are inappropriate, basically videos from the dark corners of TikTok.”

“Some videos start quietly but end in violence and horror, as much as the videos that start with ‘hello’ followed by rampant toxic, hateful or violent speech that is actively shared non-stop. The decision-making process is in seconds. Anxiety spikes about whether I made the right decision. I’ve also worked on a live stream moderation. We must watch the whole live content, even if it takes several hours,” she added.

“When I get overwhelmed, I usually take some time away from the computer or go to wellness sessions. Some people may find the wellness sessions helpful but for me, I don’t think it’s useful. I did a lot of yoga and meditation to cope when I was working on such



content, but what we need is a proper therapy. However dedicating time to conveying poignancy through the most distressing, harrowing and chaotic events does not come easily, especially when they involve the heart-rending realities of war.”

Bytedance’s TikTok office is headquartered opposite the historic Smithfield Market in London’s Farringdon. By 2025, the company had over 2,500 workers split across different locations in Canary Wharf and Farringdon.

The offices in London have dynamic, modern, efficient features with spaces decorated with colourful art, plants and green areas that seem cozy and conducive to work in. However, the space can be infested by bed bugs, posing a concern for workers. According to Erika, whose name has been changed for this report, in August 2025 management announced a bed bug infestation. “They found bed bugs in a couple of couches and told us they took care of it but won’t give us any details and won’t close the office. So many of us were forced to avoid going to the office and work from home instead,” she said.

Data workers like Erika travel every day to central London for work, while getting paid 23,000 to 25,000 Euros per year, below the London Living Wage standard (which is £28,860, approximately 33,000 Euros per year) for doing a mentally and emotionally tasking job. The company’s unfair labour practices include forcing moderators to work both per hour and per case while having to attain high accuracy stats of above 90%.

## **Unfair performance metrics and job insecurity**

Data workers at TikTok describe a system marked by structural inequality, relentless performance pressure, increasing exposure to graphic material and long term psychological consequences.

According to the moderators, the initial target they were given was one thousand videos per day. This later changed to 172 videos an hour. Workers have one minute to check policy guidelines in order to decide which to apply. They watch the videos mostly at 2x speed, the whole video must be watched. The number of the videos in the queue is quite large and around 3% of the 1000 videos they come across per day could be graphic, resulting in long term psychological trauma. Additionally, workers have to attain high accuracy both in speed and quality. Lower accuracy means lower salary.



Julius, whose name has been changed for this report, worked as a content moderator for over two years. According to him, when a difference occurs in decisions and there is disagreement on a post, it goes to quality analysts who evaluate and resolve the case. But lately, such cases are also reported automatically to PIP, which is short for Performance Improvement Plan. “PIP is a way of letting go of workers for scoring below 90% at least three times in a row. When it goes to PIP workers would often dispute, which is everyone’s waste of time to go back and forth examining whether the moderators are right or wrong, which is quite stressful,” said Julius.

Promotions at TikTok don't automatically come with raises, especially for moderators. Raises are based entirely on semi-annual or annual performance reviews, which are tied to a set of metrics that are constantly shifting.

“Even if you’re promoted in March, you’ll have to wait until the January review cycle for a possible raise. And even then, it’s slim. The targets are not only high, they're competitive. If someone does just 0.2% better than you, they might get a better score and a bonus, and you might not. It’s a quota-based system that pits moderators against each other. The Trust & Safety department used to have multiple offices across Europe: Barcelona, London, Dublin, Amsterdam, Berlin. Now only Dublin and London remain. Slowly, TikTok is closing in-house teams and shifting more of the work to BPOs, following the model companies like Meta use. When I started, the in-house team worked alongside BPO contractors. Now, it’s almost entirely BPO based,” Julius said.

TikTok queues the content to the moderators through two rounds. The first round, which contains content consisting of the most heinous, gore-filled and otherwise extremely graphic videos from all across the world, is classified to be viewed by moderators from the Global South including in Nairobi, Kenya which Bytedance hires through Teleperformance. The filtered out contents (round two) then are queued to moderators in the UK. Currently, TikTok has eliminated the two-round system, so Round 2 moderators are seeing more graphic and harmful content, without any increase in pay or support.

“They moved us into more harmful workflows and cut night shifts, which paid extra. Now everyone works day shifts which means lower salaries, even though the content is harder. I get that I’m in the Global North, and in many ways we have better conditions than moderators in the Global South who are exposed to even worse content for even less money and fewer rights. But still, it’s difficult to stay silent when even the small protections we had are being stripped away,” said Boris, one of the first hires under TikTok’s London content moderation team.



He added that due to constant policy changes the goalposts that move every quarter, and the shifting moderation systems feel unfair. “Some markets are just more traumatic than others. For example, moderating SSA/Sub-Saharan Africa or Israeli-Palestinian content is not the same as moderating for Switzerland but there’s no differentiation in pay or support.”

TikTok has a similar approach to other social media companies, such as Meta, that show negligence and lack of duty of care by knowingly ignoring the effects of toxic workloads on workers, and not providing any protective measures to ease stress and trauma for workers from war and conflict affected areas. TikTok also pushes videos to go viral regardless of what the content contains, using an algorithm that amplifies dangerous content, and fails to protect the wider community in tackling hateful, violent and genocidal speeches that instigate violence and may cause death in real time. (See the paper: [The Role of Expertise in Effectively Moderating Harmful Social Media Content | Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.](#))

“Moderators are being exposed to more disturbing content than ever before, and yet nothing has changed in how TikTok compensates or supports them. AI can’t do the job, we have seen massive leakages where contents went unchecked. Many people complained ‘why is my feed filled with graphic, pornography and other distressing contents?’ Because of the algorithm and the use of AI, a failed attempt to replace human data workers,” he said.

## **Daily exposure and emotional desensitization**

Adam, whose name has been changed, worked as a content moderator for two years from 2018 to 2020. Even though he left the job two years ago, some of the videos and images he moderated as part of his job are still embedded in his memory.

He has been through many phases of the job where he went from not being affected by the daily exposure to disturbing content, to it gradually beginning to take a toll on his mental health. “At the very start I used to get shocked and didn’t think much of it. In the middle where I watched two to five or ten videos continuously which contain graphic, suicide or abuse, it started to get to me. But it’s embarrassing to show that it’s affecting me so I would just tell myself not to be a wimp, let me man up, be like a duck, remain calm on the surface and paddle like hell underneath,” he laughed.

“Some content that involves children stands out and becomes impossible to forget, it remains somehow etched in your memories, I still remember most of them. I’ve witnessed



the visceral horror of a child being sexually abused. Then it becomes normal as you watch worse videos. There will be profound changes on how you perceive things slowly.”

“I wasn’t a person that easily gets overwhelmed at first. Sometimes the videos are about really mundane frivolous stuff and lots of misinformation, disinformation. And sometimes very sensitive, disturbing contents that follow you home. I once witnessed a man being slaughtered. That video made me shudder, I’m sure I’m not the only one who found such videos to be off-putting.” Adam continued to reveal more disturbing experiences on the job. “The dominant content I have witnessed during my content moderation career are sacrifices, cults in Africa while working in the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) market. I still think about this video where a person cuts off someone's finger as a sacrifice, that was quite disturbing. I came to think that people from the global market would easily get tracked and prosecuted for posting videos doing some heinous acts, but in the SSA market you’d find videos like that. Global users would use hashtags from SSA to avoid being caught. There was another video where that was going around at the time, it was a suicide, someone shot their head off while live streaming. I was stunned,” he said.

[Content moderation is an emotionally and mentally taxing job.](#) Moderators often suffer from burnout, fatigue, brain drain and psychological disorders due to the nature of job, which puts them in constant emotional rollercoaster having to review different kinds of videos ranging from obscenity to nudity, and from animal abuse to suicide and self-harm, or even the death of social media users.

Some of the interviewees claimed that they developed personality changes which potentially resulted from prolonged hours of watching contents that contain conspiracy theories from across the world. Luke is one of them.

“I started to antagonise everything from watching too many videos of conspiracy theorists as my job. It had profound personality changes in my behavior and how I see the world. Such content can affect how you think, rewire your thinking of what’s good and bad to worst. You start to frame this thing, it’s psychologically harmful data and how you interpret it can completely override your logical thinking. And you’d start thinking that that’s just a content. This framing doesn’t only change how you see things, it manipulates your politics. It sculpts your rule of view and stirs your emotions without you ever noticing it,” said Luke.



He added that getting used to misinformation and conspiracy theories beyond facts affects morality as well, polarizing one's view around, for example, anti-abortion and pro-choice issues, religion and spirituality, aliens, flat earth conspiracies and more.

Luke believes that some negative hateful comments prompt one to reflect on the opposite and antagonizing manifestation of the world we live in and jobs like this can alter one's brain chemistry in the long run. It can twist your thinking patterns.

"For me the most exhausting thing is the hate, the racism, the misogyny, the relentless violence in tone and language. It changes you. It makes you edgy, short tempered. You carry it with you. You start to believe that this is what humanity looks like, because you're never exposed to the other side, the beauty, the kindness. It's just the worst of people, every day."

"When I usually come across disturbing content, I would automatically compare it to another violent death or worse post and think the previous was better. As years went by, my experiences grew from strange to deeply disturbed and eventually a machine with no emotions."

The company offers wellness programs and third-party therapy apps, but many moderators don't have time to use them. "Our schedules are tied to utilization rates, meaning even a bathroom break affects our score. Meetings, wellness sessions, even yoga—none of it counts toward your utilization, and so no one can afford to participate."

## **Keeping the platform safe at a cost**

Most of the workers in trust and safety were initially content moderators who were then promoted.

Shanon was promoted to trust and safety then to quality analyst position after working as a moderator for over six months. "We are not as exposed as the moderators and trust and safety workers. But sometimes we review quite a lot of graphic imagery and misinformation. Every now and then there will be quite distressing content. I've come across a video that depicted a man in Lebanon who was kidnapped by a crime organization and they mutilated him later. Scenes such as this one, or the experience of watching horror unfold in plain sight, can be so dynamically transfixing that they linger in the mind for years, leaving behind a trace of distress. Over time, this can also manifest as absent-mindedness and a lingering sense of dread," she said.



Many workers recall how over the course of years the company changed in management, incentive and other aspects. “I was really excited to work for such a big company. The incentives and overall workers’s treatment was good. But slowly it declined and workers were treated more harshly, micromanagement and other strict rules that center labour and exploitation rather than workers’ wellbeing became common. The wellness breaks, bonuses, get-together activities with co-workers and so on, disappeared slowly and the office became hectic, strenuous and draining due to the management’s strict rules on top of the psychological toll the job normally puts one into,” said Shanon.

Amir also started as content moderator, and was then later promoted to work at the trust and safety department. The trust and safety team at TikTok has a crucial role safeguarding and protecting users from real harm, like crisis of self-harm and suicide and other online risks.

“When I worked as a content moderator, disturbing videos can unfold suddenly, escalating from benign beginnings into graphic endings. Moderators sift through daunting videos from war-affected areas, depictions of threats, hate, self-harm, suicide, shootings just to mention few, on a daily basis.”

The psychological scars from such tasks are equally strenuous and just as damaging as content moderation, but people may underestimate the trauma from continuously dwelling on hateful and violent words for several hours on a daily basis. The job has permanent effects on workers’ feelings and behaviour. “It takes seconds to get those receptors to capture the emotion from the screen and that traps you and makes you feel stuck,” Amir said, “And you don’t know how much suffering it’s causing you when you do it five to six days of a week for eight hours. With a small amount of break to process and take in all of that.”

Amir was often tasked with proactively sharing user’s data with law enforcement or reporting child safety violations to organizations. This role is governed by strict legal and privacy regulations. “It’s a specialized department, and while emotionally difficult, it offers something I never had before: a sense of purpose. Sometimes, I’ve actually seen people I helped. In rare cases, I’ve had the opportunity to save lives. That kind of impact makes it easier to remember why we do this work, something that gets lost when you’re just tagging videos endlessly,” he added.

The trust and safety team does extraordinary, often unseen work protecting vulnerable people, preventing real world harm and in some cases quite literally saving lives. They stand



on the frontlines of the platform's darkest moments so that others can experience it safely. Their work shields the company, its users and its reputation every single day.

And yet, despite carrying this immense responsibility, they are the ones who often feel unprotected. While they absorb trauma and navigate intense emotional strain, they also face recurring uncertainty about their job security. Periodic layoffs and organizational shifts send a painful message that even those safeguarding the community are not safe themselves.

## **Union busting and unlawful layoffs**

In June, 2025 TikTok announced plans to grow its UK workforce to 3000 people that year with the addition of more than [500 new job openings](#) at its new office in Barbican, London.

However, layoffs of almost the same number began in August. More than 400 employees have been terminated as of November 2025. By August, 2025 [TikTok had announced](#) a potential 500 employee layoffs, all in Trust & Safety, signalling a commitment to replace UK-based workers with BPO workers in Portugal, a European country with lower wages and weaker unions.

While the company framed these actions as part of cost-cutting and operational efficiency measures, the human impact has been severe. Hundreds of livelihoods have been disrupted, with roles reportedly eliminated in automation systems. These changes were presented as safety-driven improvements, yet automation and the so-called AI tools remain ill-equipped to fully handle the complex, high risk and emotionally sensitive work they are replacing. Rather than strengthening safety, these repeated layoffs raise serious concerns about whether the primary motivation is cost reduction at the expense of workers' well being and job security.

Since opening its office in 2018, Tiktok has outsourced significant portions of its most hazardous work to countries in the Global South, where labor protections are often weaker and labor costs are lower. [Numerous reports](#) suggest the company relies on business process outsourcing firms and gig-work arrangements to shift high-risk tasks away from regions with stronger labor protections, including parts of the EU. This strategy has drawn criticism for disproportionately placing psychological and occupational burdens on vulnerable workforces. Even in the UK where stronger labour frameworks exist, these protections appear insufficient to prevent repeated restructuring, worker reductions and ongoing instability. The result is not just unemployment but significant psychological strain,



prolonged trauma, uncertainty and lasting harm for workers who were tasked with safeguarding millions of users.

In London alone, there are around 500 estimated people in Trust & Safety, though the structure is so opaque it's hard to be sure. Roughly 500 of the workers are now in the bargaining unit trying to unionize. Anna is among them.

“A company that speaks publicly about safety and community must also ensure safety, dignity and stability for the people performing its most difficult yet essential work,” said Anna.

“We've been fighting for two years now not just for wages, but for basic recognition. TikTok keeps delaying the ballot and the negotiations, maybe because they're planning to shut down offices and know that without a union, we'll have no bargaining power. We see the union as a necessary tool to push back against bad moderation practices and protect our mental health. We're not just doing this for ourselves, we hope it spreads across the industry,” she said.

“When I started, we received two annual bonuses. Now it's down to one and it's much harder to qualify for. Worse, salaries haven't been adjusted for inflation in over five years. In the UK, that's a real loss of over 11–12% in buying power. There are no loyalty raises either, just shifting targets.”



## Conclusion

Data workers remain a low-skilled workforce tasked with keeping the platform safe, and training automation systems at the expense of their psychological and physical health. While protecting the masses, these workers risk their mental health and well-being, with having no one to protect them.

Data workers have a huge responsibility to keep the platform safe but tech companies seem to run away from accountability, putting workers through a lot of trauma for small pay and labor exploitation.

The psychological effects of data work are underestimated, especially in areas like abuse, suicide or conflict zones, where the effects are irreversible and often leave marks. In content moderation, whether it's the repetition, the graphic imagery, or the emotional weight, the impact is real. But what's even harder to swallow is that all of this is happening in silence behind the scenes of one of the most popular platforms in the world.

The people protecting users, removing child abuse, hate speech and suicide content are always invisible. Underpaid. Overworked. And often forgotten. Workers' attempts to protect their rights and wellbeing by forming a union were swiftly blocked and delayed wherever possible by TikTok.

Findings from this report show that, except for the few workers who get promoted to quality analyst positions or subject matter experts —who could potentially grow in the field, getting hired by other companies in the future—content moderators remain low-skilled, with low prospects of future career growth, overshadowed by uncertainty in their contracts, subject to labor exploitation and unfair treatment, and unrecognized as the force and backbone of the social media platform.

One of the key talking points of TikTok's London press team has been that the profound traumatic impact on human moderators is a driving reason for the company to rely on AI for moderation, but really this is just a press talking point. Where automated content moderation is used, it is still trained by humans, and more importantly the claim itself is a fig leaf masking a business decision to offshore critical trust and safety work. A growing amount of human moderation is still used every day, it has just been offshore and outsourced.



(This report was conducted in early August 2025, before the recent [mass layoffs of the data workers.](#))

## **Glossary**

BPO - Business Process Outsourcing Companies

CM - Content Moderators

T&S -Trust and Safety workers

QA - Quality Analysts

PIP - Performance Improvement Program

