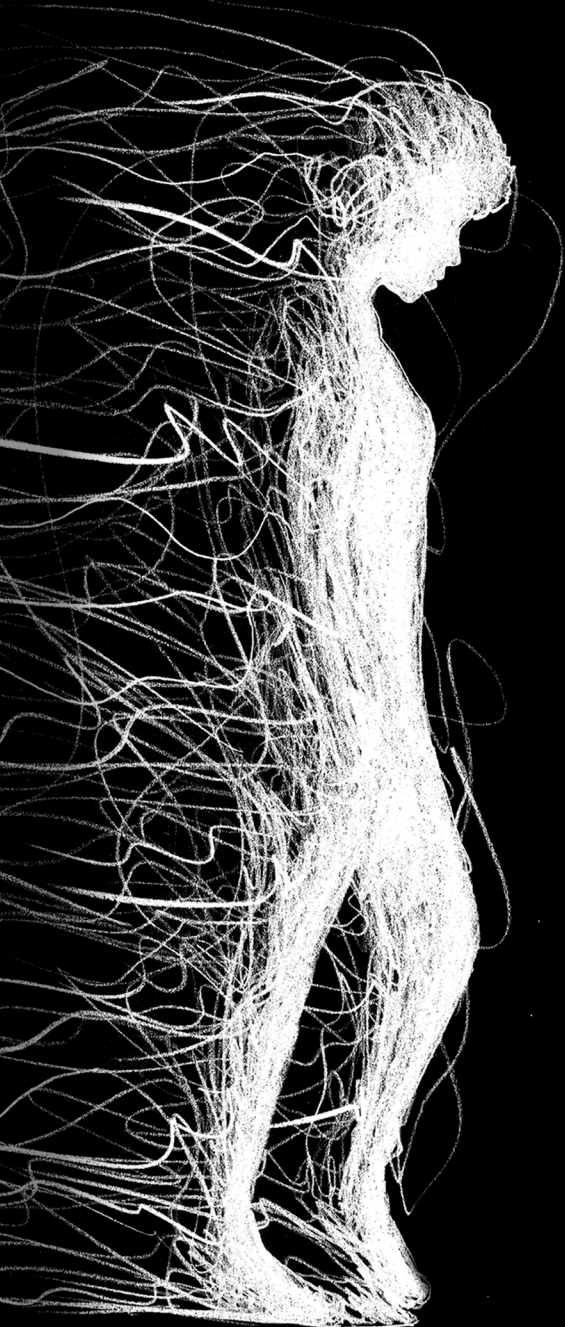


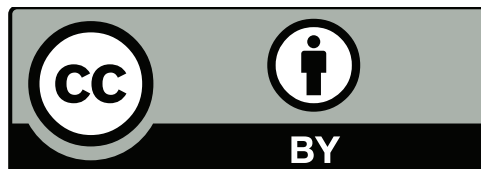
CONTENT MODERATION:

*THE HARROWING,
TRAUMATIZING
JOB THAT LEAVES
MANY AFRICAN
DATA WORKERS
WITH MENTAL
HEALTH ISSUES
AND DRUG
DEPENDENCY*



Fasica Berhane Gebrekidan

Content moderation: The harrowing, traumatizing job that left many African data workers with mental health issues and drug dependency
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PREFACE

These are the stories of African content moderators. My name is Fasica Berhane Gebrekidan. I am an ex-content moderator for Meta's Facebook in Africa. I was recruited in March 2021 via Meta's subcontractor Samasource to work in Nairobi, Kenya, and was affected by the mass lay-offs of 260 content moderators after Meta terminated its contract with Samasource without warning in January 2023.

Data workers, including content moderators, are often hired under very precarious conditions, circumventing traditional labor protections. Furthermore, the work itself is deliberately fragmented, and companies insist it is "easy." Thus, portrayals of data workers as low-skill abound. These tendencies signal new labor challenges concerning the rights of data workers, the role of large tech companies in exploiting a deregulated system, and the need for adequate government responses. The Data Worker's Inquiry Project is on a quest to bridge this gap.

Funded by DAIR, Weizenbaum Institute, and Technische Universität Berlin, the Data Workers' Inquiry is a project that foregrounds data worker's experiences and demands. The project aims to prevent further worker violations and foster solidarity for change in the above areas by establishing the facts and documenting the conflicts and grievances that emerged from these "new" modes of work.

I acquired the information for this study report by interviewing my former colleagues (ex-content moderators) and also from first-hand observation, my lived experience. More than 15 people participated, extensive interviews and data collection through questionnaires and interviews were used to compile this report.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It wasn't easy for most of the content moderators to come forward and tell their stories as they were and are still suffering from untreated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other various untreated mental and psychological issues that resulted from watching too much harmful content in their role as moderators.

Many of the respondents volunteered in this study in the hope that their life stories might be of assistance to others who want to join the content moderation and data work field and also to enlighten society regarding the experience of this hazardous job.

The names used in this report are not real names. I used pseudonyms as the respondents chose to stay anonymous for their safety and security. I would like to thank everyone who participated in this study. I also would like to extend my utmost gratitude to the Data Workers' Inquiry project for giving us this opportunity to share our stories with the world.

Trigger warning!

This report touches upon very detailed unpleasant events, graphic content, explicit sexual situations, and depictions of violence and abuse.

Therefore, readers' discretion is advised.

Thank you!

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS CONTENT MODERATION?

According to the Wikipedia page, content moderation is the process of detecting online contributions that are irrelevant, obscene, illegal, harmful, or insulting, in contrast to useful or informative contributions, frequently for censorship or suppression of opposing viewpoints. The purpose of content moderation is to remove or apply a warning label to problematic content or allow users to block and filter content themselves on social media platforms and the internet.

From that description, it becomes clear why content moderation is important: none of us want to encounter insulting or illegal content on a daily basis. However, this description leaves out an essential factor for understanding what content moderation is: the severity of the effects of the job on moderators' mental health. There is more to the job of content moderation than just removing harmful content.

According to the ex-content moderators (CMs), content moderation is the arduous task of evaluating graphic materials, navigating through very disturbing themes, and systematically applying a set of ever-changing guidelines. This includes but is not limited to extremely violent scenes, explicit adult content, and profoundly distressing subjects such as child abuse, sexual exploitation, self-harm, and more. The CM's responsibilities extend to the assessments of social media posts depicting harrowing scenarios like violent death, suicide, murder, assault, massacre, harm against animals, as well as instances of hate speech and sexualized violence.



Sama's building in Nairobi, Kenya

WHAT IS SAMA?

Samasource, which later changed its name to Sama and very recently to Samasource Impact Sourcing INC, is a company founded by the late Leila Janah in 2008.

According to many sources, Leila was an American businesswoman and tech entrepreneur who founded Sama (which means equal in Sanskrit) in an aim to give work with dignity, rather than aid, to the less fortunate and vulnerable African population.

However, unfortunately, Leila's stated mission seemed to get hijacked after her passing by Sama and tech companies such as Meta that target cheap labor through their subcontractors. According to many reports and research published in the last few years, these giant tech companies [hire data workers through outsourced companies](#) so that they can profit and exploit, as well as easily get away from their responsibility for the many emotional, mental, and physiological harms the job may cause data workers.

BPO (business process outsourcing) companies like Sama are doing the sales grooming and allowing big tech companies to exploit African workers for little pay in poor working conditions, before disposing of them after they develop mental and psychological health issues. This was evident in the recent case of the [African content moderators who were working under very poor conditions and later got laid off without warning by Meta's Sama](#). A lawsuit that was filed by the moderators claims that Meta discontinued its contract as retaliation after the moderators demanded better work conditions and attempted to form a workers' union.

FALSE PROMISES, THE MISLEADING TRAINING PHASE

In February 2019, Sama announced that it would launch content moderation jobs in Nairobi, Kenya, which would create job opportunities for more than 200 African youths from different countries. After that announcement, Sama recruited data workers mainly from Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, Nigeria, Burundi, Somalia, and Namibia.

Most of the content moderators at first felt like they were on top of the world after they joined the company. The thought of working for a big and famous platform like Facebook made them feel like they were privileged. For a moment they considered themselves as special or the lucky ones.

However, their exhilaration and feelings of vitality were short-lived, as after a few months, they started to feel the heat. As days went by, the effects of the job became overwhelming and it started to take a serious mental and emotional toll on the data workers. For most, it started as a lack of sleep, night terrors, major panic attacks

followed by deep feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, and various psychological disorders such as sleep disorder, eating disorder, and social anxiety, among others.

As I will explain in this report, after about one year, most of the moderators found themselves addicted to pharmaceutical drugs and other harmful habits in order to cope with the harrowing images and videos they were subjected to every day for 8 hours a day, 40 hours a week. To make it worse, the company refused to help the moderators when it came to providing proper mental health care. The counselors provided by Sama were not experienced psychologists, and some of the moderators claim they were uncertified psychologists whom the company placed to spy on and monitor workers rather than to offer to help workers through their suffering.

Years passed by, and despite the terrible conditions, most of the moderators couldn't find the courage to quit the job. For most, it was the only means of income; their lives and their families' lives depended on this job. For others, it was a way of securing their work permit and working visas, as they had fled their home countries as refugees.

Most of the moderators who gave interviews for this report said that Sama tricked them in the initial stage, which was only three weeks of training sessions.

“What we saw at the training was just the tip of the iceberg, it didn't seem scary or gore at first. Once we started working on production was where we started seeing the actual videos, from child porn to human slaughter, mutilated videos, to pictures and videos of suicide and self-harm, all types of disturbing stuff started to come without warning. There is a blur option on the tickets but, for me, I would say it makes it worse because you don't know what to expect and you must unblur it in order to view and action the

content no matter what,” said Bonolo Melokuhle 26, South Africa.

“At first, it felt awkward watching the nude and sexual content, then I started treating it as normal to a point that it seemed it wouldn’t affect my sexual life, but in reality, it actually did mess me up,” she added.

Annika Bandile, 28, also from South Africa, agrees with Bonolo, “I have been a content moderator since 2020. We were told by the trainers and supervisors what we’d be dealing with, what to expect slightly and in a very neglectful manner. As we started the work, we got to see how it actually is. They actually did it in a strategic way that, we would start by seeing less graphic violence and suicide and more pornographic content to ease us in at first, but as they unleashed the full batch of the graphic and suicide content, things became too much to bear,” said Annika.

“What has really messed me up the most is seeing hundreds of mutilated bodies from road carnage. I have seen people’s body parts sliced into pieces, some still alive experiencing the pain, some with parts of the brain splat on the road, some have had intestines hanging out as they hold on to them, crying, waiting for help. I have these pictures stuck in my mind to this date. I don’t think I would be able to delete this from my memory. This has made me become paranoid whenever I am on the road. These images in my head mixed with my fear of uncertainty has always made me be in constant fear whenever I’m on the road,” said Annika.

Sokoro Thabiti is a 32-year-old Kenyan ex-content moderator. He heard about the job from one of his friends. “I was told I would be working in a call center. I feel betrayed and lied to because what I expected is far from what I would ever imagined. I found myself in a loophole of a very toxic job with never-ending torture and trauma. And to make it worse, our employer never offered appropriate health care knowing what we deal with.”

Like his colleagues, Sokoro remembers every one of the goriest content that he reviewed for three years vividly. And somehow, it changed his personality and his psyche.

“Working as a content moderator has really changed how I view things now. If I didn’t have enough reason to hate humanity, well, now I do. I envy those who do not see the ugly and sadistic side of people, they are so lucky to have their innocent minds. Through content moderation, I got to see how evil humans can be, how sad and tragic the world really is, and also how unfortunate some people are. I do not believe there is anyone who would really be strong or prepared enough to go through hundreds of pictures and videos depicting the worst and most disturbing content and not change or be affected in some way. We absorb this content for years.

“Of all the disturbing stuff that I consumed for years, there is this one video that I won’t ever be able to forget. The fact that I love animals and that I have had a pet ever since I was a child, I always wanted to protect them. I got this video where a woman placed a kitten in a large mortar and beat it to a pinkish pulp, to a point you would not recognize it was a living kitten. That sickened me, and ruined my mood for months, and up to now the image is still in my mind. Thinking of it still makes me sick, and it will not leave my mind no matter how hard I try. It may not affect others as much, and they may not think of it as much, but for me, it hits home,” he said

Sokoro is also suffering from a phobia of using road transportation as a result of watching hundreds of videos depicting road accidents with graphic content: “That is one of my biggest fears. This has made me very afraid of traveling for long distances and minimize my long-distance trips as much as I can. I have been involved in road accidents before, two when I was a kid and the most recent when on my way to work in February 2023. Thankfully, I was not seriously

hurt in any of those, but the fact that it has happened more than once makes me fear the worst. It's a thought that I cannot easily get rid of. Loud noises such as tire bursts get me on the edge. All the road carnage I have seen flashes in my head, and I cannot help but feel uneasy knowing accidents happen suddenly, don't give anyone room to react and in an instance you can become part of the mutilation and carnage you have been seeing."

A GLANCE INTO THE LIVES OF THE DATA WORKERS

The production floor at Sama in Nairobi, where the content moderators sit to do the job looks more like a warehouse than an office. Adjacent to it is the big storehouse of Naivas Supermarket Headquarters, located in Sammer Industrial Park, which is a few kilometers away from the biggest slum in Nairobi known as Pipeline. Sama has two offices inside Sammer Industrial Park. Its main office has an estimated 1,500 data workers who work as data labelers and annotators for OpenAI's Chat GPT and similar giant tech companies and products. A second office is in the back for the above 200 content moderators for Meta's Facebook. According to Sama, this office is to remain secluded and secretive for safety and security reasons.

Ava Theodore, 26, is a Kenyan CM who joined Sama in 2021. She describes a day in Sama as follows: "During the time I worked for Sama, I usually started my day early in the morning. I woke up at 5:00 AM. I live a bit far from the office, so I must use Matatu (public city bus) every day to work. I remember there was a time when the company used to provide a van. I don't know why they took it away. I'm not sure if it's a retaliation but all of a sudden in 2022, they took



The production floor where content moderators work for Meta. It is a secluded area behind Sama's main building.

away the transportation service abruptly," said Ava.

"My day in Sama would be so draining, as I usually reach the office already tired from traveling with Matatu, I had to log in and put on the production activity code at 7:00 AM every morning. If I fail to do so, I must make up the minutes or hours later after work or on my weekends, or from my break time. Production time has to be strictly 8 hours on the single review tool (SRT, which Meta uses to directly monitor the activities of the data workers)," she added.

Sama made the shift and the production hours based on the client's requests and demands to keep the work going for 24 hours without interruption. Even though the workers are understaffed, with approximately 20 content moderators for one African language, the shift governance conduct is constructed in a way that doesn't stop the moderation tasks for even a minute.

"Upon reaching the production floor every day I had to fight for a place to sit. If I come late, then it gets awkward to go here and



“Matatu,” a public city bus regularly used by Sama moderators. The company used to have a van service for workers to get to the production floor, but this benefit was taken away in retaliation after workers publicly spoke about labor conditions at Sama.

there to find a place to sit in. The production floor is incredibly loud. It’s hard to find a constant convenient place to sit or to make friends that last because everyone moves in groups. One is not allowed to move from their chair, you can’t interact with other co-workers during production time, you can’t talk to people, or even browse anything on the internet to distract yourself because you are under surveillance CCTV and supervisors would rotate creeping on your back or patrolling you every now and then, so we are forced to consume very harmful content back to back non-stop until break time,” she revealed.

“We have to action every ticket within 50 seconds. If we delay, our statistics go down which will affect our average handling time (AHT) thus, it would have an impact on our production quality stats.”

“The only entertainment on the production floor is the SRT group chat, where CMs send GIFs and memes to entertain themselves,

and sometimes the SRT group chat would turn into a meme war zone or a competition among the various African countries where the moderators came from. The content we review is mentally and emotionally distressing, and it's absolutely terrifying to do this type of job in such an environment where you feel like you don't belong anywhere and there is no one to share your stress with," she said.

When quality goes down below 90% of accuracy that means workers won't get their incentive. The incentive is a taxable sum of 100 USD once every three months. In order to get the incentive, workers have to work hard for it, they cannot flinch, and they can't even move from their chairs to fetch water or go to the bathroom. For that, they have to use the 1 hour break which they also use for breakfast and lunch.

The moderators have a 20-minute wellness break twice a week. A wellness break is a break allocated to workers' time out. According to the moderators they have to beg for a wellness break on the group chat for it to be granted. "The supervisors made it look as if the wellness break is not earned but endowed and it was later reduced to once weekly as a retaliation after [the TIME magazine article](#)," said Ava.

After the TIME article, tension filled the workplace. Sama called for a town hall meeting and warned everyone not to give any interviews to the media. Sama also started firing and gave warning letters to any worker who seemed to be a threat to the management. Everyone was walking on eggshells. Moderators viewed some of the moves as retaliation, such as delaying salaries, taking away wellness time completely, or minimizing it to only once a week for 15 minutes.

The basic salary for the data workers was 1.50 USD per hour which is approximately 40 thousand Kenyan shillings per month after tax. After the article by TIME, in an attempt to de-escalate tensions and pressures from the media, [Sama made a salary increase](#), adding 20

thousand, making the monthly salary 60 thousand Kenyan shillings. However, after a year, in January 2023, Sama's management called a town hall meeting and announced a redundancy notice to the moderators by claiming that Meta had terminated its contract with Sama.

Since then, the petitioners have been battling with Sama, Meta, and Majorel (Meta's new subcontractor) in a [lawsuit filed to the Kenyan High Court](#). In the lawsuit, the petitioners (ex-CMs) argue that Meta and Sama laid them off for trying to form a workers' union, both as a retaliation and a way of disposing of the moderators because they were now enlightened about the job and their rights. Thus, they became threats to the company. The lawsuit file also includes how the moderators were discriminated against by Majorel, the new subcontractor for Facebook content moderation who refused to hire anyone who had previously worked at Sama. The reason for that is that BPOs only seek new recruits who are unenlightened about the job. This is evident as ex-moderators claim that, after the lawsuit, BPOs such as Majorel who signed as the new subcontractor for Meta have now moved to Ghana from Nairobi to recruit new data workers there.

THE TOXIC PRODUCTION FLOOR

When one enters the compound, passes security, and makes their way to the production floor, what one can notice automatically is the deafening loud music banging from 4 different speakers. "It seems like the music is there to compliment our sorrow or to make the moderators forget what they deal with. I don't really understand the necessity of loud music in the workplace. It's truly ironic, a soundtrack for your distress," said Adebowale Chibuike, 33, from Nigeria.

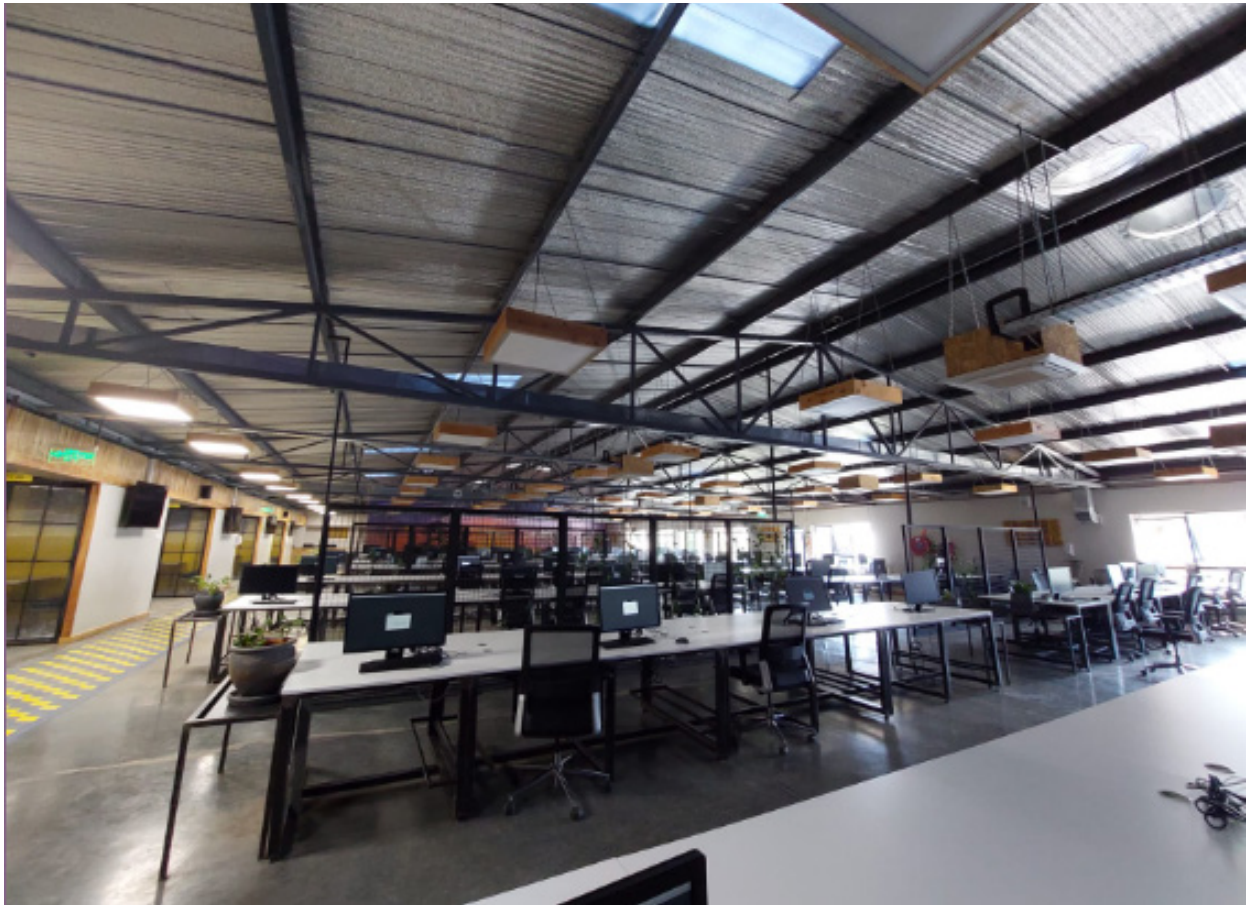
Adebowale said that he is not a big fan of the banging music because for one, music tastes differ, and also it makes the office a chaotic environment, creating more anxiety in the already distressed workers.

The moderators often complain about the production floor being incredibly hot, even when the air conditioner is on. This is because the building has a thin roof which is made of steel that is exposed to direct heat from the sun. Mosquito bites are also one of the issues that made the production floor very uncomfortable for the workers as they had to endure some serious bites on a daily basis.

Lethabo Lubanzi, 27, came to Nairobi from South Africa as a content moderator. He also describes the production floor as a very chaotic, dark place:

“It’s literally like a cinema for horror shows, where you go to see explicit horror scene content every day except it’s in real life”, he revealed.

“I worked on the night shift for three consecutive years, from December 2020 to January 2023. There are four shifts in Sama: early morning from 7:00 AM to 4:00 PM; mid-shift from 10:00 AM to 7:00 PM; night shift from 7:00 PM to 4:00 AM; and midnight shift from 10:00 PM to 7:00 AM. I chose to be on the night shift permanently because I didn’t like the toxicity of the office. During the time I was on the day shift, in some way, I felt like I was in high school. There is always drama, competition, and bullying among the workers. The production floor seems like a war zone where workers would divide into their respective countries and compete against one another. I remember at first it wasn’t like that, there was friendship and good relationships between workers. However, after the first time workers tried to strike and form a union secretly in 2020, Sama found out and fired some of the moderators. I believe it



The production floor. It can get incredibly hot due to the metal roof and the amount of computers running simultaneously. Workers are not allowed to take their phones or cameras into the floor. I received this image from an anonymous whistleblower.

was after that time that trust issues sparked and division occurred among the moderators.

“I believe Sama used our differences and diversity as a weapon to divide us more so that we don’t plan to unionize ever again. They don’t want us to have power in any way so they kept the production floor as toxic as possible,” he revealed.

This 2020 strike was instigated by Daniel Moutang, also a former CM who flew from South Africa to do the job and later found out how the job was hazardous. He raised demands about salary increases and improved working conditions to the company, but when they refused to answer his emails he made an attempt to organize a strike in the office. Some colleagues supported his ideas, while

others refused to collaborate with him out of fear of being fired from the company. Thus, the workers were divided into two, those who wanted to strike and those who feared to strike. [Sama was warned by the workers against the strike before the strike happened and the management fired Daniel without any warnings.](#) That created fear and trust issues among the workers.

Lethabo further noted that the night shift seemed quiet and peaceful, but it took so many things from him. “It made me not have a social life. I still find it hard to socialize with people. Dealing with what’s in my head in isolation made me adopt harmful habits such as heavy alcohol drinking and some drugs that I wouldn’t mention here. It’s hard to sleep after watching horrific content for 8 hours, and you know you have to do it again tomorrow. My life was basically on auto-pilot for all of the years I was in Sama. I was totally spaced out and the thought of going to that toxic place to consume horrific content every night became so torturous to my mind..

So, after work I sought refuge in a bottle of heavy alcohol, it seemed easier to ease the pain of being in that situation even for a moment. It was when I stopped going to work I realized that this job had left me with so many addictions.

I suffer from major panic attacks because I was sleep-deprived for years. I’m unable to afford any of the things I use to cope with work. Currently, I’m suffering from sleeplessness, stress, and depression with untreated PTSD,” he added.

HARDWORKING BUT OVERSTRETCHED AND EXPLOITED MODERATORS

Chukwu Akinyemi, 29, is from Nigeria. He was recruited by Sama in 2019 to work on Hawssa and Igbo languages. He is one of the CMs who developed harmful habits such as masturbation addiction and drug addiction as a result of this job.

“At first, I had some friends telling me how seeing their partners naked and all that doesn’t get them aroused sometimes, because of all that they are used to seeing. They feel like their mind is not there at the moment, or sometimes they suddenly remember a disgusting fetish that they watched from their jobs. As for me, the sexual content has made real, practical sex not as exciting anymore. To a certain extent, it even made porn something habitual and addictive. Seeing it regularly felt normal, not seeing it felt like something was amiss. That’s how it started and gradually became my addiction,” said Chukwu.

He further talked about how he became addicted to porn and masturbation rather than dating or having a partner. “Working as a moderator, I have watched content of so much nudity and explicit sexual activity as much as mutilated and dead bodies. I have unprocessed mixed trauma that got me impulsive and having intrusive thoughts of doing some things I’m ashamed of, like masturbation. I’m now addicted to masturbation and non-prescribed anti-stress drugs due to the content I was exposed to every day. Some of the videos and images have occupied my mind and are living rent-free in my head until now. Whenever I date a girl, my intrusive thoughts would get in the way, and I act very awkward and nervous. The poor

girl wouldn't know or understand what's happening in my head and she would think I'm weird and eventually leave me. So, I would indulge myself in things I would regret later."

"You see, I'm a good Christian and I grew up in church. I might have watched some porn videos as a teen, but I've never watched very explicit pornography materials in my life as I did during my content moderation job. My personality and how I see girls have changed completely. Watching these types of content everyday for over three years has unleashed the wild side in me; anywhere I go, whenever I sit in front of a computer to browse on the internet, my head automatically thinks about porn; everything that displays in my head is these things I can't speak to anyone about it. I now see myself as a wicked man addicted to masturbation, alcohol, and drugs because of it. Sama and Meta have to bring back my innocent brain because this is a crime. I want to change my whole brain," added Chukwu.

Ajab Gatoni, 29, is a Kenyan mother of one child. Her experience is not different from most of her colleagues, except she is a mom, and some very sensitive content, such as child abuse and rape, would disturb her to the core.

"I tried my best I could to cope with what I consume daily for years. I always try to leave all that I've seen at work and make my home a peaceful haven where I try my best not to think about how work was. However, It doesn't really help much. If anything, it was just ignorance, and I was lying to myself.

My initial reaction to watching a child being molested by an adult... I felt like my blood ran cold and I thought I was gonna vomit or pass out. To be a mother and watching child porn and children being raped would change your mood forever. It made me think about the worst things. I imagined my own child and got anxious," said Ajab.

“I always wonder how and why some people would do something like that, and even record it? How sick can humans be? This would make you sullen for a while. Seeing a year-old child cry as a man tries to rape her left me enraged and speechless. Something you can never get used to seeing and they would leave you broken and speechless. The worst thing is that I can’t do anything about it but just watch, action the ticket, and continue doing my job, because I must provide for my family. To make it even worse, the same tickets would recur, some would be the same, and some you would see different children in different parts of the world. It’s very sad, to say the least, once you realize this keeps happening out there in many parts of the world”.

Akello Kaikara, 28, got recruited to do Luganda language tickets in 2021. Just like his colleagues, he has reviewed similar dark content for many years. “I have seen people being tortured, being electrocuted to death, having their throats slit slowly, being hacked to death while they beg for mercy, and many more. This just shows how sadistic people could be. Some were even gorging out a child’s eye to sell. This, in turn, makes you angry, sad, helpless, wishing you were never exposed to such things since now it has become what people are capable of doing to you and you can’t really do much to protect yourself. Most of the people-killing-people pictures and videos came from Nigeria, and it has made me afraid of visiting unknown areas because of what I have already seen.”

He added, “sometimes, we would take wellness breaks off our workstation, but this never really helped. It was a temporary solution to something that may affect you for a lifetime. I don’t even understand why the company would think a 20-minute wellness break or putting unprofessional psychologists would help us in any way. I honestly think it’s a joke. I mean, why did the company make us beg for 20 minutes of wellness when we have human rights to it? I see Sama’s management as very evil and cruel individuals

for treating us like that, as if we were robots and we don't have emotions, and we can take all of this for a peanut compared to what they are making every day. We need serious mental health care, not a wellness break. We are behind the screen, sacrificing ourselves so that the social media user does not see such horrific stuff, but at what cost? Some legal intervention is needed, it should be stopped, you can't just use and dispose of people like robots!"

CASE STUDY: MODERATING THE ETHIOPIA'S TIGRAY WAR

In November 2020, a conflict between the Ethiopian government and The Tigray Regional Administrators began. There is no clear evidence of who fired the first shot or who attacked who first. However, government officials from both sides were accusing each other of what led the situation to a deadly war.

The vicious war was officially waged by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. According to him, the Tigray Liberation Front had made a military attack on his troops, and that it wasn't a war, but a mission to be carried out by the Ethiopian Military to hunt down and bring the leaders of the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) to the law. The TPL leaders, on the other hand, said that a genocidal war was waged against the people of Tigray because they firmly fought for their right to self-determination and held a democratic election.

The war lasted over two years and remains [one of the deadliest conflicts in the 21st century](#), claiming the lives of over 700,000 people. The major actors in the war were [Ethiopian and Eritrean military troops together with the Amhara militia against the Tigray regional defense force](#). Only after six months of the conflict did the

Prime Minister even admit the presence of Eritrean troops.

While the world was busy with COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war, the siege and atrocities done to civilians in Tigray were ignored. The Tigray region stayed isolated from the rest of the world for two years. All means of communication, including electricity and internet, were shut down. Humanitarian aid was also disrupted. Hundreds of thousands died while millions have been displaced from their hometowns.

The Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Amhara forces have committed atrocious crimes against the Tigrayan people, who are only 6% percent of the Ethiopian population. Various inhumane acts of violence, atrocious killings, looting, rapes, bombardment, and unspeakable crimes were committed against the people of Tigray. [The Tigrian civil society and diaspora, various international media outlets, and many public figures](#) claim this event constitutes genocide and gave warnings and called for investigations about the ethnic cleansing and war crimes committed.

[The war eventually stopped in November 2022 following a peace agreement signed in Pretoria, South Africa.](#)

There are ongoing investigations to determine the severity of crimes committed and whether they constitute genocide. Meanwhile, [the innocent civilians haven't gotten justice or answers for the devastation and suffering they've endured.](#) To make matters worse, [the Pretoria agreement hasn't been fully implemented, as there are still troops in western Tigray, and the people of Tigray are dying of man-made famine.](#)

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN HELPING PUT FUEL ON THE FIRE

During the war, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter (now X) were the main media used to instigate the war and killings of civilians. Hate speech, violent speech, and misinformation spiked as never before. Hundreds of thousands of posts were uploaded in minutes, so the daily and hourly volume was huge. There was a large amount of hate speech and incitement of violence. Meta's Facebook was the main platform that helped to instigate violence and spread violent speeches against Tigrayans.

Following these violent speeches from Ethiopian Government officials, the Ethiopian people turned to social media to spread hate and incite killings against Tigrayans. This escalation of hate resulted in widespread violence: [Tigrayans were targeted, assaulted, harassed, and killed](#) in almost [every corner of Ethiopia](#). Among these gruesome mob justice killings, there was the [burning of a person alive, committed by civil and military groups in western Ethiopia](#).

These actions of violence were encouraged mainly by [the speeches of the Prime Minister and his Social Affairs Advisor Daniel Kibret](#). Daniel Kibret is among the officials who have encouraged genocide against Tigrayans. Social media like Facebook were used to amplify these genocidal messages. Many related posts echoed calls to exterminate and annihilate every Tigrayan across the country. Following the spread of hate, Tigrayans who live outside of Tigray have become the targeted victims of abuse, harassment, and mob killings.

Amongst the victims of the hate speech spread on Facebook is Professor Meareg Amare, who was fatally shot at his residence

near the Bahir Dar University, where he lectured for several years, by extra-judicial elements in the Amhara region. His son Abraham Meareg has sued Meta. He argues that the [Facebook algorithm helped fuel the viral spread of hate and violence](#), leading to the loss of many lives of the victims of the war in Ethiopia's Tigray war, including the death of his beloved father.

CONTENT MODERATION DURING TIMES OF WAR AND CONFLICT

Speaking without exaggeration, moderating social media content during times of war feels like being on the war front.

Moderators have to watch the pain and suffering through their screens, directly from the war, and they have to delete them before they spread to the masses. What makes war content different from normal-day content is that on a typical day, social media content can go from just a post of happy pictures of a family or puppies to child abuse, suicide, violence, or pornographic content, whereas content from war is overwhelming non-stop extremely gruesome images and videos. Moderators face mutilated and dismembered bodies, people being burned alive, massacre footage, and so on daily.

Even though there was a communication blockage in Ethiopia's besieged Tigray region, footage or gruesome videos from the war never ceased to make it to social media through journalists and activists. The moderators had to be on standby to review the gruesome images every day, firsthand.

The fact that moderators came from both the perpetrators and

victims of the war made it unbearable and distressing for the data workers who were watching from a neighboring country while their own people perished in front of their eyes. Tigrayan data workers were in tremendous emotional pain as a result of being the primary victims of the events. For over two years, they were in deep agony and distress, moderating the war content while not knowing the whereabouts of their family and having no clue if they were alive or dead.

Rahel Gebrekirkos, 28, was among the first people hired by the subcontractor Samasource to moderate the Tigrinya content in Nairobi, Kenya, in March 2021. Going to the office to review the gruesome content every day was a bad dream she could never wake up from. “It was the darkest two years of my life,” she said.

According to Rahel, the distress from not knowing the whereabouts of her family, not to mention the mental and emotional toll from the horrifying job, has left her sick to her stomach. However, taking annual leave was a luxury at the time, and she couldn’t leave the job as it was her only means of survival.

“I wouldn’t wish this kind of job to anyone, not even my enemy. It’s the worst job in the world that takes your zest for life bit by bit. It’s absolutely soul-crushing. I’ve watched the worst things one can imagine. It has irreversible damage to my mental and emotional state. I’m afraid that I will be scarred for life for doing this job,” he said.

The years from 2017 to 2019 were when hate speech spiked among the three ethnic groups, namely the Oromo, Amharas, and Tigrayans. And just after the war had started in November 2020, hundreds of thousands of pieces of hate speech and violence-inciting content, images, and videos of gruesome deeds were posted nonstop every minute, every day. Due to the pressure it faced from

the international community, Meta's Facebook tried to manage this content helped by its algorithm and human content moderators. The use of algorithms was very limited to tackle this content, as there were too many types and categories, and the algorithm wasn't developed as such and it couldn't pick the violating content on its own without seeking help from humans..

Meta, through its subcontractor Sama, had hired only eight people who spoke Tigrinya in March 2021, a year after the war started. This shows a blatant misrepresentation of the ethnicities and an enormous workload to the outnumbered moderators. Sama only added another twelve Tigrinya speakers and only one Eritrean in 2022. Before this, Sama had its first recruits in 2019, which were 14 Amharic-speaking content moderators and around 20 Oromo-speaking content moderators, half of whom were Kenyans.

Each language "market" has one SME (Subject Matter Expert) and one QA (Quality Analyst). The QAs primarily work as SMEs. Supervisors for each team are mostly Kenyan. Sama treats the Ethiopian market which is composed of around 38 moderators of both the Amharic and Tigrinya languages (groups which were in a war against each other) as one market, even though they were having many confrontations and arguments due to biases on the hate speech policies.

The moderators have to follow the Facebook standards, which were amended by a team of an unidentified number of "experts" based in Dublin, Ireland. All new policies and communications come from these individuals to the SME and QAs and then to the moderators. The market has calibration sessions once every two weeks where the moderators sit and discuss some selected content about which they had disagreements. These sessions were another war zone for obvious reasons, and at some point, disagreements surfaced that

Sama's management couldn't resolve.

The work of moderators from the Ethiopian market was also used to train and improve the algorithms for automatic moderation. As the algorithm was still new and had to be refined to learn to pick up violating content independently, it didn't do much work. Data annotation of hate speech can't be done completely automatically as the machine doesn't have the capacity to know the complex terms and words of each language. Facebook mainly used the moderators to do both annotations as well as to review and delete gruesome content.

Antenh Yegezu, 32, has worked for Sama since it started in 2019 under the Amharic market. He was recruited through an agency from Addis Ababa. "I was told that I would work on a call service. Later, after I found out about the job, I had mixed feelings. The job seemed easy as there wasn't much graphic content at the time. I was not happy about the working conditions and the small pay they provided for us. It is inconsiderate of what we go through while doing this job, plus we left our countries, our future opportunities for this and risk our lives to do the job, but I don't think the company cared about us," he said.

Anteneh is an engineering graduate. He received his first degree from Addis Ababa University in 2017. His excitement in finding a job in tech after arriving in Nairobi was high, but later, he was disappointed as he found the job to be far from his expectations. "To my astonishment, the content included extremely graphic and explicit material, especially during the war. The stark realization differed greatly from my initial understanding of the role and the expectations set during the recruitment process. Initially, upon securing employment in Kenya, I was filled with excitement and hope for a promising career. The revelation that I would be moderating content for a huge tech company like Facebook heightened

my expectations regarding potential growth opportunities and professional development for my future career goals. However, as I began actively engaging with the content, where the nature of the materials became even more gruesome, horrifying, and disturbing to watch than what we had encountered during the training process, I realized that the situation was not as promising” he said.

“However, I had no other choice but to take the job because I’m expected to provide for my family and I’ve already told them that I found a good job. But the job was devastating, especially during the war, the graphic content got out of hand. Usually, I’m a person who doesn’t internalize pain and suffering that I watch, but this job has changed my psyche and personality completely. Now, I’m sensitive and desensitized at the same time. The fact that I’ve been consuming the ugly side of the internet for so long without a single outlet has led me to develop many psychological issues. It is only after I stopped the job that I realized how the job changed me. All the things I consumed are flaring up, and I can’t afford therapy to treat myself. Going back home is impossible, and I don’t know what my future would be. I’m afraid nobody will hire me with the psychological issues that I have, including untreated PTSD. I demand Meta to pay for my therapy and bring back my sane mind,” said Anteneh.

Content moderators serving the Ethiopian market in the Amharic and Tigrinya languages had no choice but to deal with the effects of the job, and the company did not provide on-site help. Most of the content moderators from the Tigrinya market were vulnerable exiled refugees who arrived in Nairobi, Kenya, fleeing the war.

Arsema Araya was in Mekelle when the air strikes and bomb attacks started in Tigray’s capital. She and a few other friends managed to get out of the area through Afar (a region in Ethiopia that borders Tigray) and escape to Addis Ababa by bus. She was separated from her parents and family members, who were also fleeing the city out

of fear.

“Upon arriving in Nairobi, I was still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. I was hearing sounds of jets in my head and vivid nightmares of the dark atmosphere in Mekelle. I was worried sick about not knowing the whereabouts of my parents and relatives. I wasn’t even able to tell them that I’d arrived safely,” she recalled.

Along with her other friends who were in the same stressful situation, they consoled each other within the Tigrayan community in Nairobi. Most of the members of the Tigrayan community in Nairobi were grieving for their people. They were in a very distressing state as they felt betrayed by their fellow Ethiopians.

“After about two weeks, I was told by one of my friends that there is this company that wants to recruit Amharic and Tigrinya speakers and that I should apply. I didn’t bat an eye. I applied immediately. I was elated to even have the thought of finding a job opportunity that fast. Though I wasn’t that religious, I started praying to God to get me this job. The company then contacted me after about a week. I went through the necessary qualification assessments and interviews and met 16 people in Sameer Industrial Park to be trained for the job. The group of people who were hired with me for the first time for the Tigrinya language were eight, including me. The others were from Uganda, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and more,” she said.

Arsema mentioned that the content from the training was nothing compared to the content she faced during the actual job. “The supervisors trained us only for three weeks, and we joined the production floor. It was at this juncture that I became fully aware of the nature of the content I would be exposed to. Nobody told us that it was a job that could jeopardize my long-term health and safety on top of the personal trauma and stress I had, coming from a war zone.”

“The enforcement of a 1 hour break period, including break-time, lunchtime, and toilet use, presented significant challenges and created an unreasonable and inhumane work environment. The allotted time was insufficient to adequately fulfill basic personal needs and essential breaks, forcing many of us to either skip meals or restrict the frequency of our restroom visits. The demanding workload and the mentally and emotionally draining nature of reviewing explicit content in large volumes without adequate intervals had a detrimental impact on my mental health. Further, the lack of professional psychological support exacerbated the strain caused by continuous exposure to distressing material.”

“The limited intervention offered by the organization in the form of so-called wellness personnel proved to be derisory. These individuals were ill-equipped, unprofessional, and underqualified as they failed to provide the necessary support and guidance to cope with the distressing nature of the content we encountered. Numerous requests and complaints regarding the need for proper psychological support and fair compensation went unanswered. It was evident that those who dared to voice concerns or raise questions were met with silencing tactics or faced systematic elimination from the workforce. As a result, the work environment grew increasingly toxic, leading to a rise in turnover rates. Working in such a tense, distressing environment, coupled with the daily exposure to explicit content for eight hours a day, took a significant toll on my overall well-being,” Arsema revealed.

Continuing to work on reviewing more graphic pictures and videos was very overwhelming and sickening for most of the Tigrinya market content moderators, especially due to the fact the company offered no psychological support. According to many interviewees in this report, these content moderators received inhumane treatment from the company, which had time caps for wellness counseling no matter how severe the graphics content coming from the war was.

Most of them were denied annual leave or wellness time to deal with it.

META AND SAMA'S FAILURE TO PROTECT ITS DATA WORKERS

Jandyose Mukasa, 31, from Uganda, suffers from major panic attacks and insomnia as a result of what she consumed for years in her role as a CM. “I watched suicide and self-harm content for years. The saddest one I ever saw was a woman hanging her child and then later hanging herself. Another was a man hanging himself in front of his child as the child kept crying for the father after he died. There was one woman who hanged herself in the forest while still carrying her baby on her back. Another jumped off from like a 50-story building only to injure themselves badly, all the limbs were severely mutilated, and you could see the bones protruding out of their skin. Viewing all these images and videos leaves you with some sort of tremendous sadness and grief that is difficult to cope with. I felt all sorts of emotions, some I couldn't pinpoint, but mostly it was deep sadness.”

“I don't think there is anyone who would view this type of content and remain normal. When you see pain continuously, you feel the pain to your core, you would feel like it's happening to you and the more you do it every day it takes your soul bit by bit. What's worse is that the counselors at Sama are unlicensed. They are not certified psychologists or real professionals in the field. They would tell you, you will get used to it and won't be as sad through time. They interrupt you from sharing what you saw and tell you to stop internalizing the emotions and saying words like 'horrible things happen to people.' How is that supposed to heal me?”

I always go to the counselors and come out more triggered and more crazy. You go to the counselors for help, but you end up being triggered and feeling low and drained after the session. To be honest, it is the counselors that made me feel like I was someone who was mentally unstable more because they were unprofessional. They won't even give you a space to cry, they are very judgemental, and they think you are faking it or trying to manipulate them so you can get a leave permit when you cry,"

According to Jandyose, the counselors do not keep workers' confidentiality, and in fact, they were put there by the company to spy on the data workers. This, in return, has made it very difficult for CMs to open up freely to counselors as they developed trust issues over time. "The counselors would study our every move carefully. When we open up, they would watch us in a very judgemental look. I personally felt very intimidated by the counselors. Some of them are not inviting to talk at all. They would make you feel insecure."

"We used to also have these involuntary group wellness sessions, and in those group sessions, the topic they chose mostly was about sex and sexuality. There were also these counselors that encourage us to have as much sex as possible and tell us that sex helps in stress," said Jandyose.

Jandyose now takes antidepressants and sleep medications to treat the insomnia, anxiety, and depression that she developed while doing the job. Most of the moderators from the Ethiopian team share Jandyose's experience. The counselors were no help and talking to them was triggering, rubbing salt on a wound.

Lwam Kidanemariam, 29, spent her dark two years in isolation on top of not knowing whether her family members were dead or alive while consuming her daily dose of gruesome videos back to back from the war in Tigray.

“The fact that I couldn’t share what I watch every day with my family or anyone and not even talk to the counselors, knowing that they won’t keep my confidentiality, made things worse for my mental health. I had an unhealthy way of coping with the situation, which was shutting down

completely and losing the ability to figure out what was going on or how I felt at all. Most of the time, I was too scared to feel anything, I avoid what is going on in my head and around me because I know it will hurt me. It was my only coping mechanism, avoidance and dissociation from reality. All I wanted to feel at the moment was being numb. As if nothing was happening, I was in denial so that I could protect myself from the cruelty of the world. As I relocated from my country alone, it was hard for me to make friends as my days off are too short, and I found it too much to process what was happening. I couldn’t find loyal friends at the office as it grew to be very toxic. So, I became isolated, which made my situation worse.

That’s when I started indulging in drugs, prescribed and non-prescribed. There was no one to share your thoughts with, so I started having conversations with myself, and that made me feel crazy, and on top of it, images of dead, mutilated, dismembered human bodies flaring up in my head unannounced because I have consumed them as my job daily without proper mental health care.”

“The stress, worry, and anxiety as a result of being exposed to such disturbing content got out of my control. I started using antidepressants in 2022; it gave me a little relief from the suffering that I was going through alone, in a foreign country.” She added

According to the moderators, these are some of the failures by the company to provide some essential help to ease the suffering of the data workers:

- Not providing professional help and professional counselors. The counselors mock and provoke the moderators' pain rather than helping us, telling us not to internalize the pain when it's clear that it's impossible not to internalize the pain when our job is to watch our own family members and people perish in front of our eyes..
- Team Leaders deny us wellness time (20-min break) claiming the particular market has too many wellness breaks which is inconsiderate and insensitive of the CM's circumstances..
- Not providing enough counselors on shift when a moderator from the market experiences a mental or emotional breakdown on the production floor. There won't be any help to calm the moderator down because they have to wait in a queue to see a counselor.
- Arranging the office in a manner that a moderator sees disturbing content in which they have emotional and mental breakdowns and the experience becomes contagious. It traumatizes other moderators on-site, making the office collectively toxic.

SUMMARY

Jobs should secure people's livelihood and personal fulfillment. However, some jobs, like content moderation, leave workers with collective trauma that stifles natural expression, joy, and passion for life.

This report shows that overworked and underpaid African content moderators were exploited and haven't gotten dignity or work that could benefit them in any way. What they acquired from the job instead are severe psychological conditions such as eating disorders, sleeping disorders, drug abuse problems, and more issues

that result from negligence and a lack of proper mental health care, which the company failed to provide.

Most of the interviewees for this report claimed that, due to its very hazardous nature, the job has affected their emotional and mental well-being severely. Most of the CMs claimed that they are currently suffering from untreated post-traumatic stress disorder, insomnia, psychosis, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, among others.

So far, there has been one reported suicide attempt and a miscarriage on the production floor. A worker from the South African team tried to hang himself with bed sheets and throw himself from the balcony of his apartment. Fortunately, his co-workers who lived next to his place saved his life. Sama immediately put him in hospital and sent him to South Africa shortly after. Sama announced this incident to all of us at a town hall meeting and begged us not to say anything to the media or anyone outside of the office.

According to a forthcoming mental health report, suicide attempts and suicide contemplation are becoming common among ex-moderators as their trauma resurfaces after they stop doing the job.

This report has found that many of the content moderators face disorders that have led to addiction, drug and alcohol use, and other similar substance abuse. As a result of the traumatic experience they went through, moderators reported recurring alcohol abuse and using prescribed and non-prescribed pharmaceutical medications such as Citalopram, Alprazolam, Fluoxetine, Codeine, Benzodiazepine, and Buspirone, some of which are widely used to treat anxiety and depressive disorders.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of artificial intelligence, technological, and digital advancements in places like Africa, where [more than 116 million people](#) are estimated to be living with mental health conditions, the topic of mental health seems to be neglected and not given much attention.

Studies show that mental, physical, and emotional health are all [correlated and work in synchronicity](#). Any trauma faced by an individual, be it mental, physical, or emotional, may result in chronic disease, psychological distress, and loss of life.

This report shows the correlation between the content moderation job and workers' emotional and mental well-being by identifying salient issues and digging through the moderators' experiences in depth. It describes how this type of work led many African content moderators to develop mental health issues and left them with various drug dependencies to deal with their traumatic experiences from the job. Despite the job being very harmful to the workers, most tech companies show negligence in protecting data workers. Consequently, this report should also serve as a call for a new policy and a new strategy to hold these giant companies accountable for using and disposing of human beings for profit.

Data workers are essential workers and human content moderation won't cease to exist. But these companies can provide an environment for the work to be performed in a way that doesn't harm the workers. It is the responsibility of every tech company to ensure every data worker's safety and security. Improving working conditions for workers is a crucial step in ensuring improvements in this field. For a platform like Meta that has [2.9 billion users and](#)

[a company that makes 2.5 billion in revenue every day](#), improving working conditions and hiring professional psychiatrists shouldn't be so difficult. This is the bare minimum for the data workers who sacrificed their mental well-being to protect their community.

GLOSSARY

ACTION: To action a ticket is to perform the necessary measure on a single content.

AHT: Average Handling Time.

CM: Content moderator.

QUEUE: Part of the SRT in which tickets that need reviewing are displayed in sequence for the content moderator to “action” them.

MARKET: a classification of a team based on one’s language (eg. Swahili market, Zulu market).

PRODUCTION: Every activity a moderator conducts during a shift (e.g., reviewing content, reviewing policy, taking a break) must be indicated in the system. “Production” is the activity code moderators put in when reviewing.

QA: Quality Analyst

SME: Subject Matter Expert

SRT: The Single Review Tool is a system that Meta uses to cue content directly to the moderators. This tool also tracks moderator performance and productivity and keeps scores that directly affect their paylips.

TICKET: videos, pictures, or written content received by the content moderator to review.

UNAVAILABLE: Activity code when the worker is away



www.data-workers.org