

Outsourced, traumatised and uncredited:

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The hidden human
workforce behind the
algorithm.

Executive summary:

Data workers are the invisible, uncredited labour force behind the biggest technological innovations of the 21st century. Despite constituting over 12% of global labour¹, data work is insufficiently remunerated, and working conditions are increasingly inhumane. This report examines the lives of those in digital sweatshops, and the conditions they endure in order to make-safe the technologies we take for granted every day.



(Image: Equidem, Scroll CLick Suffer)

In establishing the AI supply chain as the core of data workers' suffering, this report recommends numerous measures, under three core headlines:

**Enforced transparency and
subsequent accountability.**

**Investment in worker, and ex-
worker mental health.**

Establishment of a global rate of pay.

These recommendations do not solve the lasting damage inflicted upon many data workers, but create a foundation to encourage unity, accountability, and improved working conditions among data workers globally.

¹ World Bank Group (2023) 'Working Without Borders', World Bank.

Introduction:

Behind the omniscience of AI tools like ChatGPT lies an uncredited labour force. As demand for social networks and AI technologies has increased, Silicon Valley tech companies outsource the repetitive tasks which do not require experience in computer engineering or data science via online labour platforms and

BPOs². As of 2023, online gig work constituted almost 12.5% of the global labour force, with over 50 million active workers across 550 platforms³. Over a third of the work conducted on these platforms is in software development and technology.

“When exploitation becomes standard practice, facilitated by weak regulation, it is no longer accidental – it is institutional”⁴

Background:

Numerous platforms exist for individuals to seek gig-work and thus **data work**. **Sama**, a Nairobi-based data annotation company is one of many **BPOs** servicing platforms like **Meta** and **OpenAI**, and was the first of its kind to achieve B-Corp status⁷. It was established with the intention of providing work, rather than aid, to those in developing countries, and employs between 2000 and 4000 workers across four East African offices⁸. Southern Asia and South America, too, have growing data workforces, and utilise platforms like **Teleperformance** and **Clickworker** to find contracts⁹.

Data work typically consists of either **data annotation** or **content moderation**.

While data work increases in demand, gig workers increase in supply, but with this has come a trend of poor working conditions. ‘Digital sweatshops’⁵ serve as the offices for data workers across the global south, in which, workers are exposed to varying levels of graphic content, and paid very little to quickly label it. Platforms operate on a culture of fear⁶, where contracts are unstable and demands of the job are constantly increasing. Psychological damage is part of the job, not only due to the anxiety of unstable employment but the constant stream of disturbing images workers are forced to endure. Yet, employees seldom question their position due to the established power dynamics between workers and tech giants.

BPO (Business Process Outsourcing): Contracting external service providers to fulfil business functions. Data work is Intermediated platform work, mediated by online BPO companies like Sama.

Data annotation:

Labelling data with tags so that it can be understood by computer programs, allowing algorithms to learn patterns and make more accurate predictions.

Content Moderation:

“According to 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”⁷

² Sutcliffe, D. (2024) ‘The Hidden Cost of AI: In Conversation With Professor Mark Graham’ University of Oxford News, 19 July.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20260312005908/https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/features/hidden-cost-ai-conversation-professor-mark-graham>

³World Bank, *Working Without Borders*

⁴Abedin, E. (2025) ‘Content Moderation is a New Factory Floor of Exploitation – Labour Protections Must Catch Up’, The Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB), 26 June.

⁵Perrigo, B (2022) ‘Inside Facebook’s African Sweatshop’, TIME, 14 February.

⁶Fairwork (2023) *Fairwork AI Ratings 2023 – The Workers Behind AI at Sama*, p.16

⁷Gebrekidan, F. (2024) ‘Content Moderation: The Harrowing, Traumatizing Job that Leaves Many African Data Workers With Mental Health Issues and Drug Dependency’, *Data Workers’ Inquiry*, PAGE <https://data-workers.org/fasica/>

⁷Fairwork, *Sama 2023*, p.9

⁸Fairwork, *Sama 2023*, p.9

⁹Casil, A. et al. (2025) ‘Global Inequalities in the Production of Artificial Intelligence: A Four-Country Study on Data Work’, *The Handbook of Digital Labor*, pp.219–232

Datawork is the invisible backbone of current technological innovation, and as it stands, it's labour force is mostly uncredited. Tech giants have an unaddressed responsibility to increase transparency in regard to the labour behind their developments, and those who make technologies safe for rollout in the global north.

Numerous labour rights organisations have task forces dedicated to exploring and improving the working conditions quietly endured by data workers. **Fairwork** is an action-research project which developed five principles by which to measure the working conditions of data work BPOs¹⁰:

1.Fair pay:

2.Fair conditions

3.Fair contracts

5.Fair representation

4.Fair management

They work alongside the companies to improve conditions in alignment with these principles, and continually reassess the scores of the most utilised platforms. **Equidem**, the **Partnership on AI**, and other organisations have produced similar proposals for change, and work alongside governments and governmental organisations like the UK **FCDO** to implement legislative changes. Utilising existing structures like the EU, these organisations seek to utilise the hand of the global north to improve conditions in the global south, suggesting that data work requires rigorous structural reform.

The Problem:



Contracts & Conditions:

Data work platforms are evasive from the outset. Testimonies suggest that workers apply for call centre roles, only to be exposed to the harrows of data work after signing contracts¹¹.

*"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"*¹²

Data workers are informally employed¹³ in enduringly precarious roles: 'a cycle of short-term contracts, followed by periods of forced unemployment'¹⁴. Informal employment renders many ineligible for social and labour protections like medical insurance and sick pay¹⁵. Sama supposedly offers three months of paid maternity leave, but often discontinues contracts before due dates, leaving workers ineligible¹⁶.

Contracts are easily terminated with little justification, and blacklisting (the banning of workers from microwork platforms) occurs within and between platforms¹⁷. The threat of blacklisting has significant implications for financial freedom, leaving workers apprehensive to complain about working conditions for fear of redundancy¹⁸.

*"They take the '24 hour availability' thing way too seriously. It is like you sold yourself to them."*¹⁹

Fairwork (2023), 'AI for Fair Work - From Principles to Practices', Fairwork,

¹¹ Perrigo, *Facebook's African Sweatshop*.

¹² Gebrekidan, content moderation, p.9

¹³ Equidem (2025) *Scroll. Click. Suffer: The Hidden Human Cost of Content Moderation and Data Labelling*, pp.23-25.

¹⁴ Fairwork, *Sama 2023*, p.16

¹⁵ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.9

¹⁶ Fairwork, *Sama 2023*, p.12

¹⁷ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.12

¹⁸ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.12

¹⁹ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.32



(Image source: TIME, 'Exclusive: OpenAI Used Kenyan Workers on Less Than \$2 Per Hour to Make ChatGPT Less Toxic')

On paper, hours are standard: a nine hour work day, or 37 hour work week²⁰. Equidem's research, however, found that contracts stipulate up to 45 hours per week, without additional compensation²¹. Working 18 to 20 hours per day is not uncommon²², and breaks are strictly limited to one hour per shift, including bathroom, food, and water breaks²³.

Workers are held to unrealistic targets of accuracy and speed. One worker reported a queue of 700-1000 tickets per shift, an expected response time of less than ten seconds²⁴; failing to meet the weekly 5000 ticket-minimum means "trouble"²⁵. Targets are poorly communicated, and management demands unpaid overtime upon claims they have not been met²⁶.

"Complaints of fatigue would be met with the reminder that a client exit would mean worker joblessness"²⁷

In March 2025, a Teleperformance moderator passed away after complaints about fatigue were ignored by management²⁸. Leave is not respected by management across BPOs and workers rarely rest, even when sick; informal employment means days off only reduce their monthly bonus²⁹.



Remuneration:

The basic salary for junior labellers at Sama amounts to \$170 per month, \$1.50 per hour if all targets are met; with a potential explicit content bonus of around \$70³⁰. Bonuses account for over half of data workers wages³¹, but conditions for achieving these are unclear and poorly communicated. Basic pay is often too low to make ends meet, so workers aim tirelessly for bonuses, adding additional precarity in an already unstable line of work. One Sama worker took the job to save, but was pushed further into debt by wage instability; Her overtime rate was below her usual rate and her work was sometimes rejected for unknown reasons, leaving her unpaid³².

MIT suggests the average Sama salary is 2.5 times the Kenyan minimum wage³³, a statistic readily exploited by BPOs, who claim additional compensation may disturb the economy. Paying wages that fail to meet basic needs, while promising rewards of up to 70 percent more pay³⁴ for dangerous levels of overwork, evidences fundamental disregard for employee welfare. Outsourcing serves multinationals, who seek the most labour for the least money.

"Requesting data work is not charity. The AI industry needs these workers just as much as these workers need jobs. Demanding data work from vulnerable people is less about philanthropy and more about the ability to pay low wages"³⁵.

²⁰ Perrigo, *Facebook's African Sweatshop*

²¹ Perrigo, *Facebook's African Sweatshop*

²² Abedin, *Factory Floor of Exploitation*

²³ Gebrekidan, *Content Moderation*, p.12

²⁴ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.26

²⁵ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.26

²⁶ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.27; Fairwork, *Sama 2023*; Abedin, *Factory Floor of Exploitation*

²⁷ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.26

²⁸ Fairwork, *Sama 2023*, p.16

²⁹ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.27

³⁰ Perrigo, B. (2023) 'Exclusive: OpenAI Used Kenyan Workers on Less Than \$2 Per Hour to Make ChatGPT Less Toxic', *TIME*, 18 January. <https://time.com/6247678/openai-chatgpt-kenya-workers/>

³¹ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.27

³² Fairwork, *Sama 2023*, p.15

³³ Perrigo, *Facebook's African Sweatshop*

³⁴ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.27

³⁵ Yang et al. (2025) 'Ethics of Data Work: Principles for Academic Data Work Requesters', *Weizenbaum Discussion Paper*, 48. https://www.weizenbaum-institut.de/media/Publikationen/Weizenbaum_Discussion_Paper/Weizenbaum_Discussion_Paper_48.pdf



Welfare:

“Jobs like content moderation leave workers with collective trauma that stifles natural expression, joy, and passion for life”³⁶

Data work compounds the precarity of gig work, with the psychological turmoil of exposure to graphic content. In 2021, three million posts were flagged for removal every day, on Facebook alone³⁷. Content moderators are forced to confront child abuse, sexual exploitation, self harm, and more. Many experience night terrors, panic attacks and PTSD symptoms, increasing numbers turning to drugs and alcohol to cope³⁸.

One moderator reported that 99% of the material he reviewed was child sexual abuse³⁹; another developed a phobia of road transport after exposure to graphic accident videos; another read up to 700 pieces of sexually violent text per day⁴⁰.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if anyone ever jumped from [the] stairs. We hear people doing drugs in the bathroom any time of day. It is a horrendous place to be in. I never thought mental health could get this serious”⁴¹

Equidem recorded 60 incidents of psychological harm among 76 workers across Colombia, Ghana and Kenya, with suicide attempts and ideation among reportedly increasing⁴². The most vulnerable are the most failed, during the Tigray civil war, Sama employed refugees already living with PTSD to moderate an influx of war content⁴³. In February of 2022, Sama delivered OpenAI a sample batch of 1400 images depicting bestiality, rape, child sexual abuse and death. After this was publicised, Sama terminated their contract⁴⁴. In 2020, a lawsuit against Facebook paid \$52 million to fund mental health treatment for some of its American moderators⁴⁵.

Wellbeing measures enforced by BPOs are ineffective and inconsistent. Group counselling sessions further trigger individuals⁴⁶, and counsellors are frequently deemed judgemental, and accused workers of pretending in order to be signed off⁴⁷. Counsellors are generally ill-equipped to deal with the trauma of moderators. Workers are strictly tied to ninety wellbeing minutes per week, and face consequences for overuse⁴⁸. Counsellors who use their role to advocate for working conditions are often reprimanded and dismissed⁴⁹.

PSYCHOLOGICAL HARMS		
AGGRESSION	IRRITABILITY	SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL AND ISOLATION
ANXIETY	NIGHTMARES	STRAIN ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS
DECISION FATIGUE	NIGHT TERRORS	STRESS FROM TARGETS AND PENALTIES
DEPRESSION	NUMBNESS	SUBSTANCE DEPENDENCE
DETACHMENT AND INDIFFERENCE	PANIC ATTACKS	SUICIDAL IDEATION
EMOTIONAL FATIGUE	POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER	TRAUMATIC MEMORY RECALL

Figure 1: Psychological Harms reported by data workers⁵⁰

	Colombia	Ghana	Kenya	Incidents
Physical harms	13	2	16	31
Sexual harms	3	-	7	10
Psychological harms	25	4	31	60
Economic harms	24	6	22	52
Incidents by country	65	12	76	153

Figure 2: incidents reported, by country⁵¹

³⁶ Gebrekidan, *Content Moderation*, p.35

³⁷ Wray, B. (2025) 'Content Moderation is What a 21st Century Hazardous Job Looks Like', Equal Times, 27 March. <https://www.equaltimes.org/content-moderation-is-what-a-21st?lang=en>

³⁸ Gebrekidan, *Content Moderation*

³⁹ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.9

⁴⁰ Du, M. and Okolo, C. (2025) 'reimagining the future of data and AI labour in the global south', Brookings, 7 October. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/reimagining-the-future-of-data-and-ai-labor-in-the-global-south/>

⁴¹ Equidem, *Scroll, Click Suffer*, p.10

⁴² Equidem, *Scroll, Click Suffer*, p.11

⁴³ Gebrekidan, *Content Moderation*, pp.22–25

⁴⁴ Perrigo, *Open AI*

⁴⁵ Perrigo, *Open AI*

⁴⁶ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.38

⁴⁷ Gebrekidan, *Content Moderation*, p.33

⁴⁸ Gebrekidan, *Content Moderation*, p.32

⁴⁹ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.39

⁵⁰ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.32

⁵¹ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.11



Power imbalance:

“The misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all”⁵²

An underlying power imbalance between workers and the AI supply demotivates regulation in the Global South⁵³. A planetary labour market means value lies in the cheapest labour. Unrealistic expectations for cost and turnaround enforced by lead firms displaces market instability on to workers, and this precarity leaves workers to decide between ‘bad jobs or no jobs’. Despite the fact that Sama increased worker wellbeing by cutting ties with OpenAI, workers were economically damaged by resulting job loss⁵⁴.

“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.”⁵⁵



Transparency:

The glamour of AI deliberately disguises the human labour behind it. Over half of tech companies headquartered in the Global North now deliver services primarily from the Global south⁵⁶, with multinationals like Facebook profiting from ‘exporting’ trauma away from Europe and the U.S., towards the developing world⁵⁷.

The AI supply chain anonymises those at the top, leaving multinationals unaccountable for employee mistreatment, and redirecting blame to BPOs⁵⁸. An accepted ‘culture of secrecy’ abounds data work⁵⁹, which obscures responsibility for employee wellbeing. Workers are unaware of who their tasks service⁶⁰, rendering calls from both OpenAI and Facebook for workers to report issues directly, hollow. Equidem found ‘rampant’ wellbeing policy violations across firms, purported regard for employees is performative⁶¹.

In 2019, one Sama worker attempted unionisation: 43 workers threatened strike action. In response, Sama flew two executives to Nairobi, fired the organiser for ‘bullying’, and reminded all of those involved that they were replaceable⁶². NDAs embedded in most data workers contract make it nearly impossible for workers to discuss work at all⁶³, Equidem found that clauses not only suppressed disclosures of proprietary information, but also exposure to abusive content, exploitative conditions, and employer misconduct⁶⁴.

A culture of silence sustains systemic exploitation. Workers are punished for communicating on the production floor, and legally prevented them from discussing work, and systemic harm remains hidden. Without union support, data workers remain vulnerable, unaware of their rights, and forced to endure such suffering alone.

“It’s absolutely terrifying to do this job in an environment where you feel like you don’t belong anywhere and there is no one to share your stress with”⁶⁵

⁵² Sutcliffe, *the hidden cost of AI*

⁵³ Sutcliffe, *the hidden cost of AI*

⁵⁴ Perrigo, *OpenAI*

⁵⁵ Gebrekidan, *Content Moderation*, p.21

⁵⁶ Fairwork (2025), *Fairwork AI Ratings 2024/5; Who Powers AI? Assessing Fairness in the AI Supply Chain*

⁵⁷ Perrigo, *Facebook’s African Sweatshop*

⁵⁸ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.21

⁵⁹ Miceli, M. et al. (2024) ‘Who Trains The Data for European Artificial Intelligence?’, European Parliament, *The Left*, pp.1–40.

⁶⁰ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.41

⁶¹ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.13

⁶² Perrigo, *Facebook’s African Sweatshop*

⁶³ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.41

⁶⁴ Equidem, *Scroll Click Suffer*, p.41

⁶⁵ Gebrekidan, *Content Moderation*, p.14

Opportunities for change:

Change requires collaboration between multiple actors, primarily:

International Labour Organisation & other global rights and labour organisations:

e.g. Fairwork, IG Metall, The Partnership on AI, Equidem

BPOs:

e.g. Sama, Teleperformance, ClickWorker

Multinationals & lead firms:

e.g. ByteDance (TikTok), Meta (Instagram, Facebook, etc.), OpenAI (ChatGPT)

Data work populations & their governments:

e.g. Kenya, Colombia, Ghana

Emphasis on transparency, and subsequent accountability:

Multinationals & lead firms; BPOs:

- Suspend all NDA clauses which prevent workers from discussing exploitation.
- Conditions and expectations for work should be explicit and accessible:
 - **Contracts** and labour **rights** should be available in terms that are **accessible** to the individual at any time.
 - Job **expectations** expressed before contracts are signed.
 - **Turnaround** and **workload** should be explicit.
 - **Conditions for bonuses** should be clear.
 - **Conditions** for work **rejection** should be clear.

Data work population governments; global organisations:

- Establish a taskforce to evaluate the labour rights compliance of existing platforms:
 - **Expose** the companies that utilise BPOs which fail to meet the bare minimum.
 - Establish a process to **continually review platform's compliance**, and penalties for non-compliance.
- Enforce mandatory transparency at every level of the supply chain:
 - **Penalise lead firms** who set non-compliant labour expectations.
 - **Redirect accountability** to multinationals at the top of the chain.

Employee and ex-employee mental health:

Multinationals, lead firms & BPOs:

- Content moderation only undertaken within long-term contracts:
 - Prevents workers from engaging in psychologically damaging work out of economic desperation.
 - Ensures measures can be taken to monitor the wellbeing of workers on such contracts.
 - Remuneration for those engaging with sensitive content should be significant, but contracts should be limited to prevent individuals damaging themselves due to financial incentive (ie, one content moderation contract to be followed by a simple data annotation contract).
- Support is not a perk nor benefit, and should be industry standard and entail the following:
 - No caps on welfare breaks
 - Support should not be managed in house.
 - Insurance provided by platforms includes access to independent, trauma-informed care.
 - Safeguards in place to prevent punishment for taking time off due to mental health or physical exhaustion.

Data work population governments:

- Establish a global recovery fund for workers past and present who have been damaged by data work, to fund:
 - Legal action against multinationals who knowingly utilised exploitative BPOs.
 - Trauma-informed psychiatric care.
 - Financial aid for those unable to work as a result of trauma.

Data work population governments & international organisations:

- Establish a 24/7 data workers hotline, available globally, for workers to seek psychological assistance, report mistreatment, and ask questions regarding labour rights.

Enforce a global standard of pay:

Multinationals, lead firms, BPOs & governments:

- A baseline for payment to be followed and enforced:
 - All workers to be paid at least a living wage calculated using a recognised tool, such as the Anker benchmark or Fair Wage Guide. **Living wage being sufficient to afford a decent standard of living for the worker and their family, which includes food, water, housing, education, healthcare, transport, and other essential needs including emergencies.**
 - A pilot program should be run to establish average time per task, including instruction comprehension, and any additional training.
 - Wages should reflect task difficulty.
 - If pay per task is used, this should be calculated based on average time per task, not unrealistic targets which require unpaid overtime.
 - Overtime should always be paid.

Multinationals, lead firms & BPOs:

- Bonuses capped at 20%, ensuring overwork is not encouraged.
 - Living wage should ensure workers are able to make ends meet, thus bonuses are truly a bonus, not a necessity.
- All workers should have access to payslips, timesheets, and a procedure to challenge payment issues.

Data work population governments:

- Employment status should be recognised, and workers rendered eligible for social protections

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