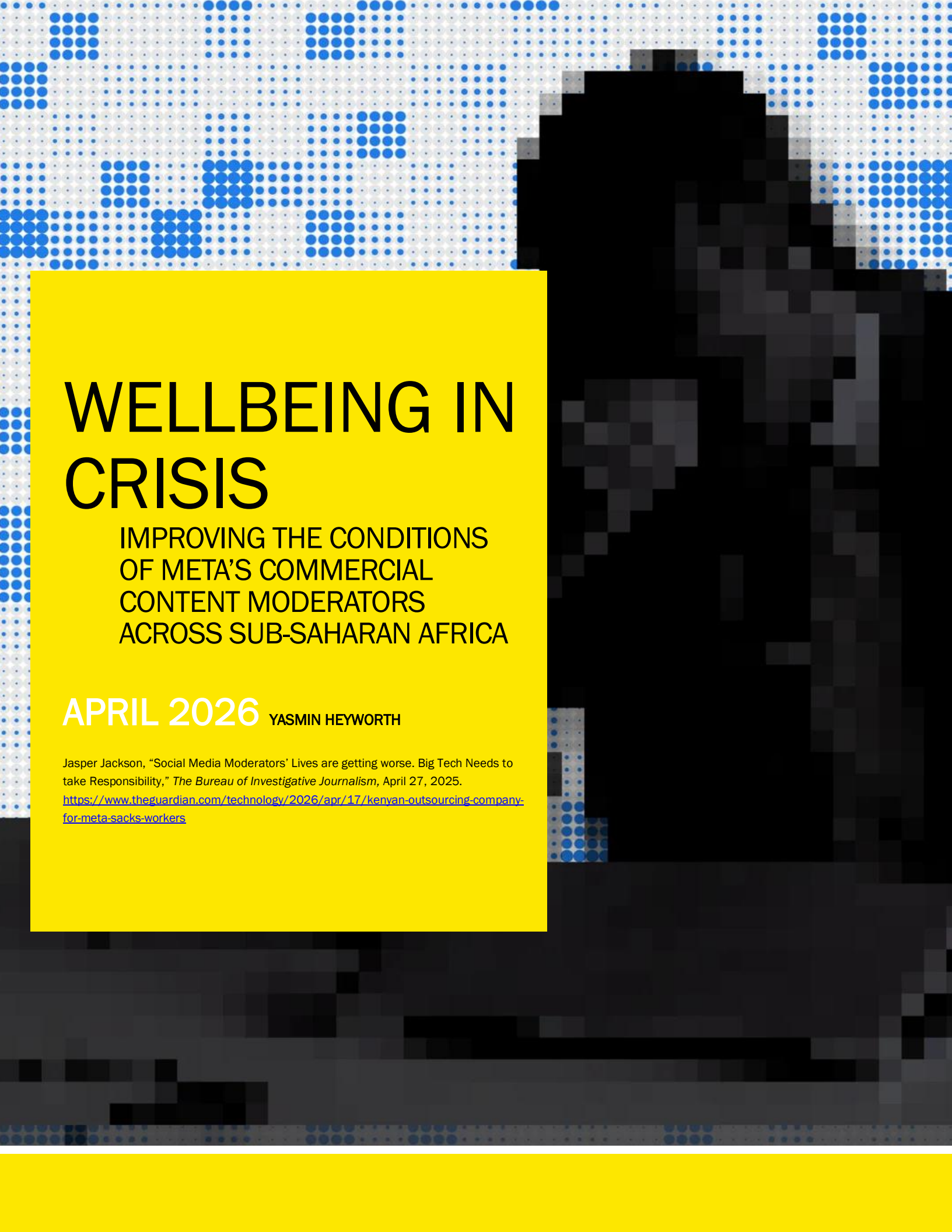




WELLBEING IN CRISIS

IMPROVING THE CONDITIONS
OF META'S COMMERCIAL
CONTENT MODERATORS
ACROSS SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

APRIL 2026 YASMIN HEYWORTH

Jasper Jackson, "Social Media Moderators' Lives are getting worse. Big Tech Needs to take Responsibility," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, April 27, 2025.
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2026/apr/17/kenyan-outsourcing-company-for-meta-sacks-workers>

Executive summary

This policy report examines the issues of violent and explicit imagery commercial content moderators (CCM) face daily in their jobs and the detrimental effects this has upon their mental and physical wellbeing, their role being to remove dangerous content from social media platforms. Looking at the region of Sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus upon Kenya's capital Nairobi and Ghana's capital Accra, as known digital hubs in the Global South, as well as being key locations for Meta to outsource work to. Companies like Sama and Teleperformance are some of these subcontracted companies, known for their mistreatment of casual workers and not providing supportive working environments for commercial content moderators.¹

To counter these impacts, national governments like in Kenya for instance need to take a more involved role, putting pressure on Meta to ensure national workers standards aligns with that of the ILO. There is also a need for Meta and its subcontractors to improve their mental health support and provisions for employees.

Introduction

With over 5.2 billion internet users accessing social media content, there is a severe lack of acknowledgment for the invisible workforce that removes graphic content in order to maintain public safety.² Commercial content moderators (CCM), remove user generated content to ensure it complies with platforms guidelines, and this flagging or removal of content is a crucial element of a safer online space.³ The sanitised content we see is often carried out by content moderators in exploitative, emotionally staining, and unjust conditions.⁴ Especially now with a recent rise in concern over hate speech, how platforms develop rules and mediate disinformation is becoming increasingly important.⁵

¹ Claire Wilmont and Rachel Hall, "Suicide attempts, Sacking and a Vow of silence: Meta's New Moderators Face Worst Conditions Yet," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, April 27, 2025.

² Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer. The Hidden Human Cost of Content Moderators and Data Labelling*. 2025. 8.

³ Paolo Petricca, "Commercial Content Moderation: An opaque maze for freedom of expression and customers' opinions," *Rivista Internazionale Di Filosofia E Psicologica* 11, no.3 (2020):308.

⁴ Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer. The Hidden Human Cost of Content Moderators and Data Labelling*. 2025. 8.

⁵ Robyn Caplan, *Content or Content Moderation? Artisanal, Community-Reliant, and Industrial Approaches*. Data and Society 2018: 1.

Only this month, reports have shown more than 1,000 content moderators for Sama, a company based in Nairobi which Meta outsourced much of its CCM work to, have been terminated. This is following mass layoffs and civil lawsuits against Meta and Sama, where workers accused the companies of not providing adequate mental health support.⁶ The paper will look specifically into the role of Meta, and through the process of outsourcing the tech giant appears to distance itself from the problem, appearing neutral, sidelining issues, and making them appear specific to social media and not the management of CCM.⁷ Whilst there has been recognition of the mistreatment in Kenya, Meta moved much of its moderators to the Ghanaian capital Accra, under French multinational Teleperformance, which also has a history of abuse towards workers rights.⁸

Currently, workers are subject to violence, murder, hate speech, abuse, extremist, and sexually explicit content daily when carrying out moderation for Meta's platforms including Instagram and Facebook. A necessary factor for this work is human interpretation, not AI or digitally generated systems, due to its accuracy requirements, policy subject to change, context, and culturally specific understandings.⁹

Through Meta's rigorous regimes moderators are left with psychological trauma from being exposed to disturbing content and there is and has been a great deal of fear around calling out companies for their wrongdoings.¹⁰ The aim of this policy report is to address these issues of exposure to harmful content, workload pressure and job insecurity in order to make tangible and meaningful steps towards change, to address the current wellbeing crisis.

Background

Since all areas of humanity can have an online presence, regulating content in recent years has become far more complex especially due to the growth of the internet.¹¹ As AI becomes more prevalent across Meta's platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Threads) so does the labour to sustain it.¹² Kenya is known for being the digital hub within the Global South, hosting

⁶ Robert Booth, "Kenya firm sacks more than 1,000 workers after losing Meta contract", *The Guardian*, April 17, 2026.

⁷ Robyn Caplan, *Content or Content Moderation? Artisanal, Community-Reliant, and Industrial Approaches*. Data and Society 2018: 8.

⁸ Claire Wilmont and Rachel Hall, "Suicide attempts, Sacking and a Vow of Violence: Meta's New Moderators Face Worst Conditions Yet," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, April 27, 2025.

⁹ Miriah Steiger et al, "The Psychological Well-Being of Content Moderators: The Emotional Labour of Commercial Content Moderators and Avenues for Improving Support," *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, no.341 (2021):1.

¹⁰ Steiger et al, "The Psychological Well-Being of Content Moderators" 1-2.

¹¹ Paolo Petricca, "Commercial Content Moderation: An opaque maze for freedom of expression and customers' opinions," *Rivista Internazionale Di Filosofia E Psicologica* 11, no.3 (2020):309.

¹² Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer. The Hidden Human Cost of Content Moderators and Data Labelling*. 2025. 18.

migrants across sub-Saharan Africa like Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Somalia to work as content moderators, many fleeing violence which they later witness online as moderators.¹³

Fears of governments returning migrants without work leave many workers vulnerable, undervalued, and subject to inadequate compensation,¹⁴ as subcontractors can exploit this urgent need for employment because returning home is often not an option for many migrants working in content moderation, due to the violence and dangers they will subsequently face.¹⁵

This labour carried out by content moderators, classified as dirty work in the digital world, is necessary in order to maintain safety for others, but the accountability of Meta's hand in this is obscured,¹⁶ due to the way in which these outsourced companies are seemingly in charge of operations. Subsequently, CCM is often stigmatized as the worst job in technology, and due to this attitude workers are often kept invisible by they companies which hire them.¹⁷ This systematic power imbalance sees the workers as passive victims to allow Meta and its subcontractors to continue to exploit.¹⁸

Legal battles in 2023 saw the Kenyan government recognize Meta's mistreatment through Sama but left many with severe mental illnesses, and those who continued to work with Teleperformance in Ghana traumatized. Therefore, this system of exploitation continues if Meta is allowed to run operations where there is a lack of adequate provisions for mental health and wellbeing, which in turn should be backed up by outsourced companies.

“I used to be spooked when I saw blood. Now I’ve become numb. The job altered my character” Abel, content moderator, Accra¹⁹

¹³ Jacqueline Wambui Wamai et al, “A new social contract for the social media platforms: prioritizing rights and working conditioning for content creators and moderators,” *International Journal of Labour Research* 12, no.1-2 (2023) 98.

¹⁴ Wamai et al, “A new social contract for the social media platforms,” 105.

¹⁵ Wamai et al, “A new social contract for the social media platforms,” 98-99.

¹⁶ Will R. Mbioh, “Resisting Meta: content moderation, diffraction and the constituent power of Kenyan law within the Global South,” *International Journal of Law in Context* 21, no.4 (2025): 711-712.

¹⁷ Miriah Steiger et al, “The Psychological Well-Being of Content Moderators: The Emotional Labour of Commercial Content Moderators and Avenues for Improving Support,” *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, no.341 (2021):2.

¹⁸ Will R. Mbioh, “Resisting Meta: content moderation, diffraction and the constituent power of Kenyan law within the Global South,” *International Journal of Law in Context* 21, no.4 (2025): 720.

¹⁹ Claire Wilmont and Rachel Hall, “Suicide attempts, Sacking and a Vow of Silence: Meta’s New Moderators Face Worst Conditions Yet,” *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, April 27, 2025.

The Problem

Harmful content: exposure to violence

Constant exposure to such violence and explicit content containing murder, rape, suicides, and beheadings for instance paired with a lack of adequate psychological support has led to severe poor mental health, isolation, emotional strain, depression, and anxiety for many content moderators. Currently, many of Meta's subcontractors do not have sufficient practitioners in place to support the workers, and if they do wellness sessions are often capped at 33 minutes daily without comprehensive enough understanding to support.²⁰ With fear of returning to conflict zones, many migrant workers are often instructed not to tell anyone of their mental state, and subsequently become at risk of depression, substance abuse, insomnia and in some cases suicide attempts. Solomon, a moderator in Nairobi was told he could not continue with Meta after his continued substance abuse, self harm and suicide attempts saying, "I'm not the person I was before."²¹ This is precisely the type of poor mental health which employers must address and not dismiss.

In other examples, work for a BPO (Business process outsourcing) firm subcontracted by Meta in Kenya left one worker Hamidi, fired and backlisted for advocating for his college's wellbeing.²² And another worker Alamini was left with lingering traumatic effects impacting her romantic relationships due to the exposure to violent sexual content.²³ There is a serious cause for concern if impacts from the job effect other elements of employee's personal lives. Many workers were unaware of the harmful content of what the job entailed, with the boundaries of personal and professional blurring as they were constantly exposed to traumatic videos and imagery originating from their homelands.²⁴ The instability of this global workforce therefore reports elevated levels of low quality of life, burnout, and life dissatisfaction.²⁵ These issues are not taken nearly enough as seriously as they should, which further perpetuates the trauma and stress.

²⁰ Jacqueline Wambui Wamai et al, "A new social contract for the social media platforms: prioritizing rights and working conditioning for content creators and moderators," *International Journal of Labour Research* 12, no.1-2 (2023): 101.

²¹ Claire Wilmont and Rachel Hall, "Suicide attempts, Sacking and a Vow of Silence: Meta's New Moderators Face Worst Conditions Yet," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, April 27, 2025.

²² Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer. The Hidden Human Cost of Content Moderators and Data Labelling*. 2025. 11.

²³ Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer*. 10.

²⁴ Will R. Mbaho, "Resisting Meta: content moderation, diffraction and the constituent power of Kenyan law within the Global South", *International Journal of Law in Context* 21, no.4 (2025): 718.

²⁵ Miriah Steiger et al, "The Psychological Well-Being of Content Moderators: The Emotional Labour of Commercial Content Moderators and Avenues for Improving Support," *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, no.341 (2021):3.

Workload pressure and inconsistent guidelines

Subject to working days ranging from 8-20 hours, in violation of labour laws, moderators often must see and assess an unfair number of cases.²⁶ Commercial content moderators struggle with limited autonomy, little control, and recovery time due to the job requirements, which further perpetuates levels of stress.²⁷ A grueling workplace with opaque targets²⁸ is often met with inconsistencies and confusing guidelines. Meta is known for protecting hegemonic groups and flagging abuse towards categories include ‘men,’ and ‘white’ but often does not account for anti-discrimination rules for other gender and racial lines,²⁹ which goes against what moderators perhaps wish to protect or indeed what should be a prioritized protected group online. As well as this, many cases which fit with proposed guidelines seem to be flagged as inappropriate, unnecessarily. For instance, images from a private pro-breastfeeding nursing groups were removed from a Facebook page, classified as sexually explicit as they had images of nipples, which is prohibited by the guidelines as it shows female nudity.³⁰ This is only one example of a puzzling and ill-conceived area of the guidelines which does not protect moral decency.

Furthermore, the level of pressure to meet targets led many workers to turn to substance abuse to cope, Aziz working as a quality analysis for a BPO firm in Kenya, subcontracted by Meta said,

“The company pressures us to meet the weekly targets. We have to work unpaid overtime to meet them and if we don’t meet a target, the company cuts our pay”

Aziz, content moderator, Nairobi³¹

This is a concerning condition of an already emotionally taxing and stress inducing job. One piece of evidence that has become known due to the court cases against Meta was that during Covid, there was a mandatory two-week unpaid training period for Meta’s content moderators in Kenya. Many were unaware of the distressing nature of the job prior to this training, where they had a short period to learn how to engage with the content, grasp cultural nuances and sign NDAs to agree not to discuss the content of the videos they see outside of work, which only added to the mental distress.³²

²⁶ Eiffel Abedin, “Content moderation is a new factory floor for exploitation- labour protection must catch up” *The Institute for Human Rights and Business*, June 26, 2025.

²⁷ Miriah Steiger et al, “The Psychological Well-Being of Content Moderators: The Emotional Labour of Commercial Content Moderators and Avenues for Improving Support,” *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, no.341 (2021):4.

²⁸ Claire Wilmont and Rachel Hall, “Suicide Attempts, Sacking and a Vow of Silence: Meta’s New Moderators Face Worst Conditions Yet,” *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, April 27, 2025.

²⁹ Robyn Caplan, *Content or Content Moderation? Artisanal, Community-Reliant, and Industrial Approaches*. Data and Society 2018: 25.

³⁰ Paolo Petricca, “Commercial Content Moderation: An opaque maze for freedom of expression and customers’ opinions,” *Rivista Internazionale Di Filosofia E Psicologica* 11, no.3 (2020):317.

³¹ Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer. The Hidden Human Cost of Content Moderators and Data Labelling*. 2025. 32.

³² Jacqueline Wambui Wamai et al, “A new social contract for the social media platforms: prioritizing rights and working conditioning for content creators and moderators,” *International Journal of Labour Research* 12, no.1-2 (2023): 99-100.

Job insecurity: failure of support

Unstable employment, unfair wage deductions, penalization for sick leave and forced unpaid overtime are some of the ways content moderators are subject to harsh treatment, many workers have concerns over the ability to manage themselves due to the financial pressures inconsistent pay brings. One employee working for a BPO in Kenya, Iman, worried about how this level of inconsistent would change the future of her family.³³ There is incredible pressure to meet demand without exception, often operations shut down in one country too and move elsewhere when threatened with legal battles. In many cases moving from Kenya to Ghana.³⁴

“The company called to threaten me. They talked about how easy it was for me to be replaced by just a click of a finger”

Fanaka content moderator, Nairobi³⁵

Upon moving operations to Accra conditions were just as bad, Teleperformance (French multinational subcontractor) payed workers less than a fifth of the estimated living cost for the area, and subsequently if the workers missed targets, they lost out financially.³⁶ Within these ethical and legal grey zones, the lack of a fixed salary and unpaid tasks creates issues leading to instability and job insecurity. In the 2023-2024 Kenya court cases against Sama, the government remained relatively passive,³⁷ the concern here is that subcontracted companies can easily shut up shop and move elsewhere when workers voice concern, all happening with little repercussions for Meta, and this continues to happen. But the dependency for work for many across sub-Saharan Africa is what continues this cycle of exploitation, with many migrants continuing on within these slave-like conditions, a sense of helplessness and inability to improve the situation is commonplace. To explain this exploitation and lack of support, in an 8-hour shift for instance, content moderators often must sift through 480-720 pieces of content³⁸ which is a ridiculously large amount, especially due to their graphic and violent subtext; paired with the insecure nature of work, only causes more problems for the employees.

³³ Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer. The Hidden Human Cost of Content Moderators and Data Labelling*. 2025. 10

³⁴ Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer*. 10.

³⁵ Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer*. 11.

³⁶ Claire Wilmont and Rachel Hall, “Suicide Attempts, Sacking and a Vow of Silence: Meta’s New Moderators Face Worst Conditions Yet,” *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, April 27, 2025.

³⁷ Eiffel Abedin, “Content moderation is a new factory floor for exploitation- labour protection must catch up” *The Institute for Human Rights and Business*, June 26, 2025.

³⁸ Will R. Mbogh, “Resisting Meta: content moderation, diffraction and the constituent power of Kenyan law within the Global South,” *International Journal of Law in Context* 21, no.4 (2025): 718.

Opportunities for change: recommendations

Prioritising mental health

In the past Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta, praised the critical role of content moderators and the often-damaging implications the work has to their health, in service of the wider community.³⁹ But not enough is currently being done by Meta to positively change the standards of wellbeing. There is a need to mitigate risk prior to exposure, with apparatus like resilience programmes to help workers develop self-soothing techniques when faced with graphic content. As well as implementing breaks and downtime as a stress reliever, encouraging socialising outside of work to build bridges of belonging with others.⁴⁰ It is essential these are in person to escape the long hours workers spend on technological devices. This would create a supportive working environment, by promoting extracurricular activities, to hopefully encourage holistic wellness.⁴¹ Trauma is not managed by check ins and Meta needs to ensure correct procedures are in place. Lead firms like Meta need to have free confidential access to professional help, like counselling, independent to employers to ensure efficiently and trust.⁴² Otherwise, a cycle of psychological trauma and stress will continue.

Recognition of workers, improvement of conditions

To wider organisations, standards must fit with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and recognise CCM as high-risk essential work, operating within a psychological hazardous framework. There needs to be a suspension of compulsory NDAs to prevent content moderators from discussion trauma and allow workers to report harm without any legal intimidation. As well as this, job descriptions must clearly outline the demands of the job, and an elimination of unpaid training is imperative.⁴³ In 2022, the ILO added “a safe and healthy working environment” to their framework, as a fundamental workers right and obligation of management systems to provide, naming occupational safety and health convention 1981(no.155) and promotional framework for

³⁹ Miriah Steiger et al, “The Psychological Well-Being of Content Moderators: The Emotional Labour of Commercial Content Moderators and Avenues for Improving Support,” *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, no.341 (2021):1.

⁴⁰ Steiger et al. “The Psychological Well-Being of Content Moderators” 1-2.

⁴¹ Jacqueline Wambui Wamai et al, “A new social contract for the social media platforms: prioritizing rights and working conditioning for content creators and moderators,” *International Journal of Labour Research* 12, no.1-2 (2023): 107.

⁴² Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer. The Hidden Human Cost of Content Moderators and Data Labelling*. 2025. 48-50.

⁴³ Equidem, *Scroll. Click. Suffer*. 48-50.

occupational safety and health convention 2006 (no. 187) as essential points of reference.⁴⁴ This framework must be upheld in all working environments; it is not a benefit of the job but a requirement of private sector employers.

Adequate standards of support (Collaboration of governments and international organisations)

Subcontractors working within regions like Nairobi and Accra must be held accountable on wages, working hours and union rights by regional and cross body standards like within Governments and African Union standards to penalise these companies like Sama and Teleperformance for their opaque practices; suspensions, blacklist and fines of their workers discussing issues honestly and openly is wrong.⁴⁵ There must be transnational agreement to enforce and prevent exploitation, in recent years governments are taking back control on these matters, but more must be done.⁴⁶ Although there is often difficulty to hold third part vendors accountable in a different jurisdictions, like in the 2023 Kenyan court case, Meta was seen as dictating the role of Sama therefore they had a legal obligation to prevent harm.⁴⁷ This recognition is particularly important as it is a step towards protecting commercial content moderators now and creating better standards of international collaboration for future generations.

⁴⁴ "A safe and healthy working environment is a fundamental principle and right at work," International Labour Organisation, Accessed April 18, 2026. <https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/safety-and-health-work/safe-and-healthy-working-environment-fundamental-principle-and-right-work>.

⁴⁵ Eiffel Abedin, "Content moderation is a new factory floor for exploitation- labour protection must catch up" *The Institute for Human Rights and Business*, June 26, 2025.

⁴⁶ Robert Gorwa, *The Politics of Platform Regulation: How Governments Shape Online Content Moderators*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2024): 2-3.

⁴⁷ Will R. Mbioh, "Resisting Meta: content moderation, diffraction and the constituent power of Kenyan law within the Global South," *International Journal of Law in Context* 21, no.4 (2025): 722.

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