

Facebook content moderators in Kenya call the work 'torture.' Their lawsuit may ripple worldwide

June 29 2023, by EVELYNE MUSAMBI and CARA ANNA



Former Facebook content moderator Nathan Nkunuzimana speaks to The Associated Press in Nairobi, Kenya, Friday, June 9, 2023. Nearly 200 former content moderators for Facebook are suing the company and a local contractor in a court case in Kenya that could have implications for the work worldwide.

Credit: AP Photo/Khalil Senosi

On the verge of tears, Nathan Nkunuzimana recalled watching a video of a child being molested and another of a woman being killed.

Eight hours a day, his job as a content moderator for a Facebook contractor required him to look at horrors so the world wouldn't have to. Some overwhelmed colleagues would scream or cry, he said.

Now, Nkunuzimana is among nearly 200 former employees in Kenya who are suing Facebook and local contractor Sama over working conditions that could have implications for social media moderators around the world. It is the first known court challenge outside the United States, where Facebook settled with moderators in 2020.

The group was employed at the social media giant's outsourced hub for content moderation in Kenya's capital of Nairobi, where workers screen posts, videos, messages and other content from users across Africa, removing any illegal or harmful material that breaches its community standards and terms of service.

The moderators from several African countries are seeking a \$1.6 billion compensation fund after alleging poor working conditions, including insufficient mental health support and low pay. Earlier this year, they were laid off by Sama as it left the business of content moderation. They assert that the companies are ignoring a [court order](#) for their contracts to be extended until the case is resolved.

Facebook and Sama have defended their employment practices.

With little certainty of how long the case will take to conclude, the moderators expressed despair as money and work permits run out and they wrestle with the traumatic images that haunt them.

"If you feel comfortable browsing and going through the Facebook page,

it is because there's someone like me who has been there on that screen, checking, 'Is this okay to be here?'" Nkunzimana, a father of three from Burundi, told The Associated Press in Nairobi.

The 33-year-old said content moderation is like "soldiers" taking a bullet for Facebook users, with workers watching harmful content showing killing, suicide and sexual assault and making sure it is taken down.



The Facebook logo is seen on a cell phone on Oct. 14, 2022, in Boston. Nearly 200 former content moderators for Facebook are suing the company and a local contractor in a court case in Kenya that could have implications for the work worldwide. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Dwyer, File

For Nkunzimana and others, the job began with a sense of pride, feeling like they were "heroes to the community," he said.

But as the exposure to alarming content reignited past traumas for some like him who had fled political or ethnic violence back home, the moderators found little support and a culture of secrecy.

They were asked to sign nondisclosure agreements. Personal items like phones were not allowed at work.

After his shift, Nkuzimana would go home exhausted and often locked himself in his bedroom to try to forget what he had seen. Even his wife had no idea what his job was like.

These days, he locks himself in his room to avoid his sons' questions about why he's no longer working and why they likely can no longer afford school fees. The salary for content moderators was \$429 per month, with non-Kenyans getting a small expat allowance on top of that.

The Facebook contractor, U.S.-based Sama, did little to ensure post-traumatic professional counseling was offered to moderators in its Nairobi office, Nkuzimana said. He said counselors were poorly trained to deal with what his colleagues were experiencing. Now, with no mental health care, he immerses himself in church instead.

Facebook parent Meta has said its contractors are contractually obliged to pay their employees above the industry standard in the markets they operate and provide on-site support by trained practitioners.

A spokesman said Meta could not comment on the Kenya case.

In an email to the AP, Sama said the salaries it offered in Kenya were four times the local minimum wage and that "over 60% of male

employees and over 70% of female employees were living below the international poverty line (less than \$1.90 a day)" before being hired.



This photo shows a Facebook logo being displayed in a start-up companies gathering at Paris' Station F, in Paris on Jan. 17, 2017. Nearly 200 former content moderators for Facebook are suing the company and a local contractor in a court case in Kenya that could have implications for the work worldwide. Credit: AP Photo/Thibault Camus, File

Sama said all employees had unlimited access to one-on-one counseling "without fear of repercussions." The contractor also called a recent court decision to extend the moderators' contracts "confusing" and asserted that a later ruling pausing that decision means it has not gone into effect.

Such work has the potential to be "incredibly psychologically damaging," but job-seekers in lower-income countries might take the risk in exchange for an office job in the tech industry, said Sarah Roberts, an expert in content moderation at the University of California, Los Angeles.

In countries like Kenya, where there is plenty of cheap labor available, the outsourcing of such sensitive work is "a story of an exploitative industry predicated on using global economic inequity to its advantage, doing harm and then taking no responsibility because the firms can be like, 'Well, we never employed so-and-so, that was, you know, the third party,'" she said.

In addition, the mental health care provided might not be "the cream of the crop" and concerns have been raised about the confidentiality of therapy, said Roberts, an associate professor of information studies.

The difference in the Kenya court case, she said, is that the moderators are organizing and pushing back against their conditions, creating unusual visibility. The usual tactic in such cases in the U.S. is to settle, she said, but "if cases are brought in other places, that might not be so easy for the companies to do that."

Facebook invested in moderation hubs worldwide after being accused of allowing [hate speech](#) to circulate in countries like Ethiopia and Myanmar, where conflicts were killing thousands of people and harmful content was posted in a variety of local languages.

Sought for their fluency in various African languages, content moderators hired by Sama in Kenya soon found themselves looking at graphic content that hit painfully close to home.

The two years that Fasica Gebrekidan worked as a moderator roughly

overlapped with the war in her native Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, where hundreds of thousands of people were killed and many Tigrayans like her knew little about their loved ones' fate.

Already suffering from having to flee the conflict, the 28-year-old spent her workday looking at "gruesome" videos and other content overwhelmingly related to the war, including rape. With videos, she had to watch the first 50 seconds and the last 50 seconds to reach a decision on whether it should be taken down.



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Credit: AP Photo/Khalil Senosi

The feeling of gratitude she'd had upon landing the job quickly disappeared.

"You run away from the war, then you have to see the war," Fasica said. "It was just a torture for us."

She now has no income and no permanent home. She said she would be looking for new opportunities if she could only feel normal again. A former journalist, she can't bring herself to write anymore, even as an outlet for her emotions.

Fasica worries that "this garbage" will stay in her head forever. While speaking with the AP, she kept her eyes on a painting across the café, deep red with what appeared to be a man in distress. It bothered her.

Fasica blames Facebook for a lack of proper [mental health care](#) and pay and accuses the local contractor of using her and letting her go.

"Facebook should know what's going on," she said. "They should care about us."

The fate of the moderators' complaint lies with the Kenyan court, with the next hearing on July 10.

The uncertainty is frustrating, Fasica said. Some moderators are giving up and returning to their home countries, but that is not yet an option for her.

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