

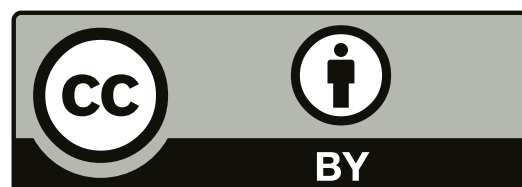
THE UNKNOWN WOMEN OF

CONTENT MODERATION

Data
Workers'
Inquiry

BOTLHOKWA RANTA

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Illustrations by [Marc Pohl](#).

Design by [Heitor Bonan](#).

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PREAMBLE

I, Botlhokwa Ranta, a data worker from South Africa and co-researcher in the Data Workers' Inquiry, am the author of this zine. The Data Workers' Inquiry is a project that seeks to create a platform for data workers to formulate and pursue research questions that serve their interests and needs. This zine is a significant contribution to this endeavor, presenting a collection of personal accounts illuminating the human impact of data work and the urgent need for reform in the tech industry.

As a co-researcher, I worked alongside a dedicated team led by Milagros Miceli and supported by Adio Dinika, Camilla Salim Wagner, Laurenz Sachenbacher, and Krystal Kauffman. Through my firsthand experience as a content moderator and involvement in the research project, I gathered valuable insights and personal narratives that shed light on the challenges female data workers face in Nairobi, Kenya. The culmination of my work as a co-researcher is this zine, which features my own story along with those of other migrant women who have worked as content moderators for Meta through the outsourcing company Sama. These powerful accounts serve as a testament to the often-overlooked human toll of the work performed behind the scenes of modern technologies.

By sharing these stories and experiences, I aim to foster a greater understanding of the realities faced by data workers and bring attention to the pressing need for improved working conditions, fair compensation, and adequate support for those who play a critical role in the development and maintenance of modern technologies. It is my hope that these stories will inspire readers to engage with the discussed issues and support the ongoing efforts to ensure fair and ethical treatment of all workers in the tech industry.

Trigger warning!

The stories included in this zine include graphic details of worker exploitation as well as physical violence, psychological violence, and sexual abuse. Reader discretion is advised.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the brave migrant female workers who trusted me with their stories and allowed me to tell them here. I am giving them pseudonyms here to avoid putting them in danger, but their names are not forgotten.

INTRODUCTION

The Unknown Women of Content Moderation is a zine designed to familiarize readers with the dedicated women who work in the content moderation field. Eight women from different African countries share their stories and experiences. This zine also highlights the ongoing efforts to improve work conditions, the formation of a union, and the bonds of solidarity between workers. Beyond being a resource for women, this zine is intended for anyone considering a career in content moderation. It serves as a guide, sharing personal stories that shed light on how these women have overcome numerous professional challenges.

In the early 2000s, the internet witnessed the emergence of social media platforms, starting with the pioneer Six Degrees. Subsequently, platforms like Friendster and MySpace gained popularity. MySpace, the first widely embraced social media platform, was later surpassed by Facebook in 2004, which became the world's most visited social media platform. Social media platforms were initially created to foster digital connections and allow individuals to effortlessly share aspects of their lives.

As Facebook grew, other platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and TikTok joined the landscape, expanding online sharing possibilities. However, alongside the positive aspects, social media harbors a darker side many users may not encounter. These platforms enable users to reach a large number of people throughout the world, which can be used to create meaningful connections, stay in touch with family and friends, or disseminate hateful and disturbing content. Distressing materials shared on social media include depictions of violence, terrorism, and explicit content, raising the question: how do social media giants prevent these harmful posts from being disseminated?

This is where the role of content moderators becomes crucial. **Tasked with filtering and removing content that violates community standards set by platforms, these human workers play a pivotal role in maintaining a safe online environment.** The use of social media exposes users to a wide range of content, both positive and harmful. Content moderators are essential in mitigating the potential harm that users may experience while navigating these platforms.

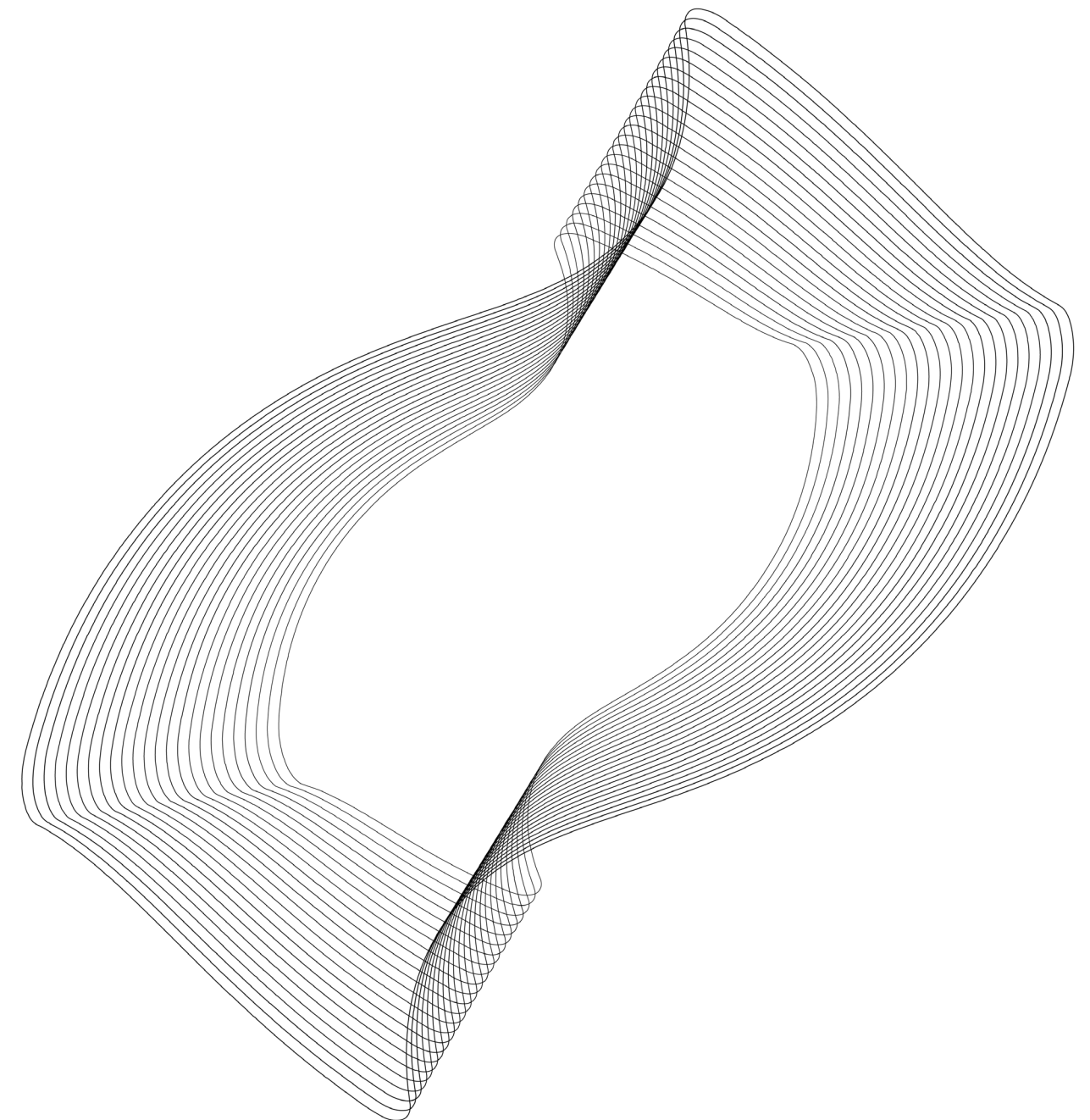
As social media can be used to disseminate harmful content, content moderators must confront disturbing materials involving murder, rape, and paedophilia.

In the following sections, I will dive into the stories of women who, like myself, moderated content for Meta through the business process outsourcing (BPO) company Sama in Nairobi, Kenya. Many of these women are mothers dealing with the long-term effects of their profession. Their voices are often silenced and overlooked. This collection offers us a space to share our individual stories while also highlighting the similarities in the struggles we faced as content moderators, as women, and as mothers. I also reflect on the necessary changes to improve conditions for everyone participating in this line of work.

Considering the ways large social media companies present themselves to the world as socially responsible and valuing humanity, it is disheartening to hear about the experiences some women have had while working in this space. Their basic human rights were violated, with no protection from the company that hired them. These violations are unacceptable. But experiencing them while working for a company that markets itself as “socially responsible”, deeply concerned with mental health, and striving to have a positive impact in the world is especially troubling. To be promised opportunities, a good work environment, and support, only to be repeatedly let down and have our rights violated was challenging and traumatizing for all of us.

This zine aims to shed light on how these experiences have

affected us mentally, financially, and, to some extent, physically. Having been through so many hardships and seeing how my colleagues went through similar challenges, I felt it was important to share our experiences. Even though the content moderation space is flawed, there is a silver lining: its issues can be fixed and managed to make content moderation a better profession. In conclusion, I turn to the question of what these changes should be.



WHAT IS CONTENT MODERATION?

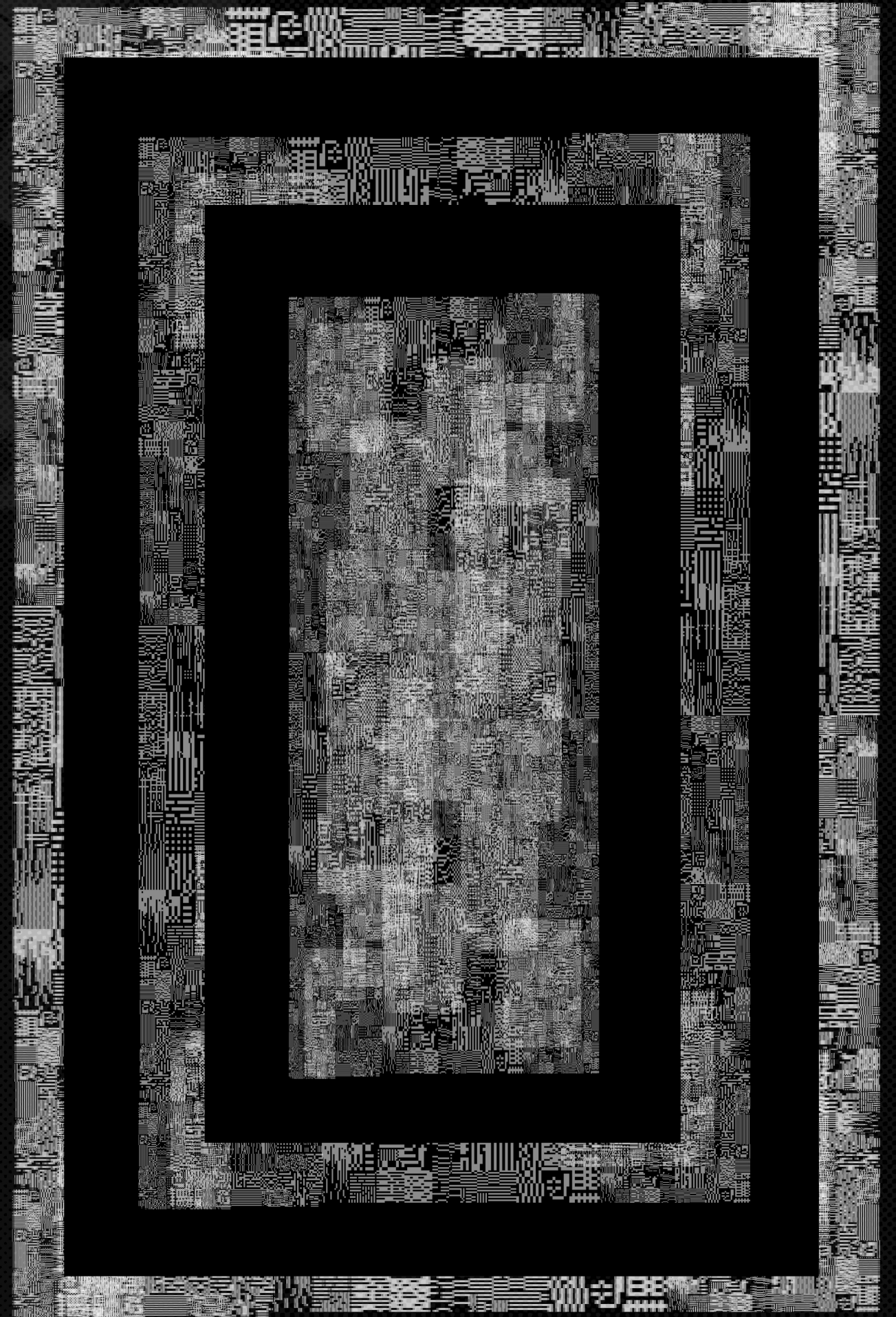
I like to say that content moderators are the police officers of the internet. They are tasked with reviewing the pictures, videos, audio files, and text uploaded online to ensure that content violating laws or platform guidelines is removed. Moderators often encounter disturbing, horrific, or illegal content on the internet, and they are responsible for deleting it to maintain a safer online environment for users. The majority of online platforms have some sort of automated moderation system in place. Otherwise, it would be impossible to deal with the volume of posts and comments created globally each day. A large volume of content that violates policies is picked up by these automatic systems, which means that not every single post is viewed by human content moderators. However, problems arise when the system cannot understand the language of the post or spot violations. When the automatic systems meet their limits, human content moderators come into play; they understand the languages being used and are trained on the various policies set by social media platforms.

The work of content moderation is largely outsourced and off-shored to third-party companies, often in countries with cheaper labor and less protective regulations - mainly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The content moderators sign contracts with these third-party companies, even though all the tasks come from large social media companies. This not only allows tech companies to exploit poor workers from the Global South, but it also allows them to sidestep legal liability and social responsibility over the working conditions. These workers are far from the fancy main offices of giant tech companies and are not even recognised as official employees. As the saying goes, out of sight, out of mind - tech companies

treat outsourced workers as a non-factor. It is important to note that there are ongoing legal disputes in Kenya over this practice and the question of legal liability. In this zine, I collect stories of women hired by one outsourcing company, Sama. The women who share their stories here are originally from South Africa, Uganda, and Namibia, countries where people are often desperate for employment.

**THE WOMEN
OF CONTENT
MODERATION:**

**OUR
STORIES**



BOTLHOKWA RANTA

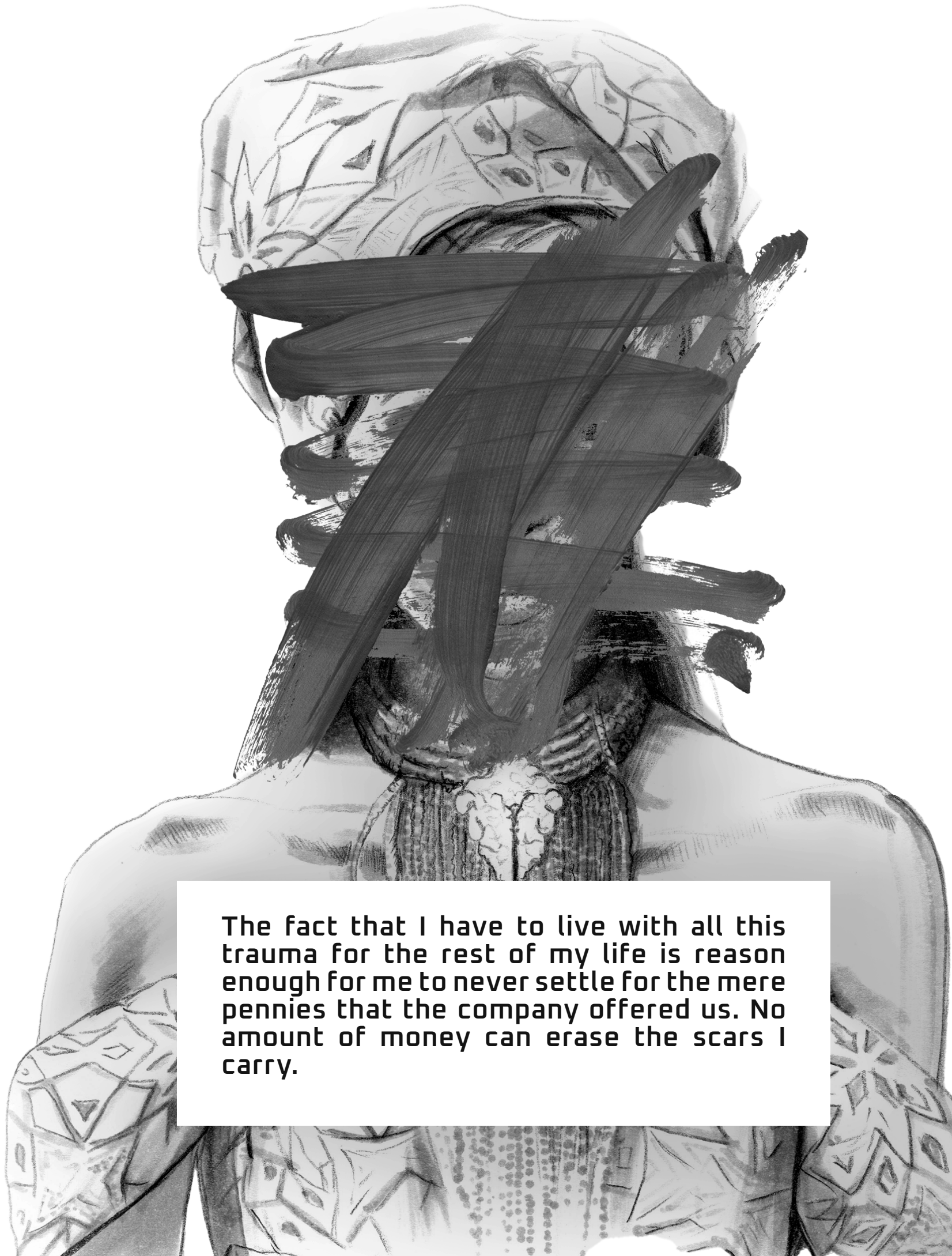
I am Botlhokwa Ranta, a 28-year-old woman from the heart of South Africa and a mother of two amazing baby girls. As the author of this zine, I thought I should start with my own story.

I describe myself as a hustler and a person who is always looking for ways to make my children's lives better than my own. Growing up, I was surrounded by a group of women who constantly showed me and proved to me that, with or without men, they could make anything happen for themselves. This taught me that a woman has to be able to stand on her own and embrace every challenge that comes with womanhood.

I was a young girl from Soweto who had always wanted more from life and knew that life didn't just start and end in the township of Diepkloof. This story might be sad, but it also aims to prove to any young girl from a township like mine that not all shiny things are diamonds; sometimes, it might just be a tin reflected by the sun. Wanting more from life has its ups and downs, but life is a journey.

Diepkloof, Soweto, the place I call home, is often portrayed as a dangerous, crime-ridden ghetto on TV. But the reality is far more complex. Yes, poverty is rampant, and unemployment is high, with [many relying on government grants](#) to survive. Being raised in such an area, you are always looking for ways to get out, as the people are stuck in their ways of living; poverty and suffering have become normalized, and I had always envisioned a better life for me and my children.

When I heard about a company in Kenya that was hiring through my best friend (who was working there at the time), I seized the opportunity. She went out on a limb for me and sent me



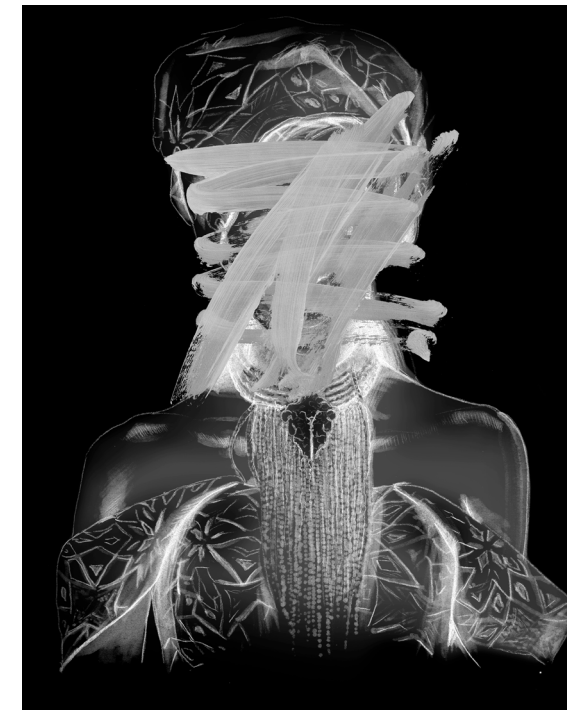
The fact that I have to live with all this trauma for the rest of my life is reason enough for me to never settle for the mere pennies that the company offered us. No amount of money can erase the scars I carry.

the email addresses of the recruiter and the HR lady who was working there. A few weeks later, I received a call and an email informing me that I was being considered for the position of content moderator. At that point in my life, I had never heard of content moderation, nor did I know what the job entailed. All I knew was that I wanted better, and this seemed far more promising than the dead-end retail jobs I had been working at the time. I needed to build a future for my family, and this was my chance to create a better life for them. I was ready to do whatever it took to make it happen. Little did I know that the price I would pay for chasing this dream would be far higher than I ever could have imagined.

Becoming a single mother at just 21 was a turning point in my life. With that, I had become a statistic in my township, where 6 out of 10 girls are pregnant before they turn 25. I was now part of the trend of being a young single parent, as the father left when he found out I was pregnant. This was a wake-up call that I needed to fight harder for the future I wanted.

When I started working for this company, Sama, in June 2021, I thought I would be growing my work profile and that I could advance within the company. During the application process, I was told that they were looking for a team leader for my language market, which excited me because I had been a team leader before this job. However, I soon realized that I was just fooling myself: when I started working, I discovered that the people who had been working for the company for years were still stuck in the same positions they started in, indicating that there was no change within the company for long periods of time.

Even though I knew the salary was minimal, it was better than rotating with the sun while sitting in the township doing nothing all day. From the moment I landed in Nairobi, I saw my future in Kenya, as my own country was going downhill. I envisioned my daughter and



I building our lives here.

I remember my first day at the office, and I was in total awe as I saw all the so-called provisions that the company, in theory, offers: the wellness rooms, the counselors, and the quotes from the owners of the company about mental health care and the company's beliefs about empowering young Africans. With all my excitement, I even took a video to show to my mother because I was proud and

happy to be working for a company that values mental health, as I have had my own issues with depression in the past. The company's prioritization of mental health was displayed on a tour given to us explaining how Sama works, and how everyone is there to help you in any time of need. After a while within the company, you start to realize that the reality is not as shiny.

Fast forward to a year of working at Sama, I became pregnant with my second child and had some complications during my first trimester. My doctor recommended taking 14 days off from work or being put on bed rest. Unfortunately, with the company, that was impossible. Citing a shortage of hours, Sama had me working from home just three days after my doctor advised bed rest.

Just two months after I moved to Nairobi, I lost my sister. I was devastated, and the content I was moderating at work became unbearable. I pleaded with my supervisors to let me switch to a different stream, but they refused, claiming that my team needed the hours. **To this day, I cannot cope with my sister's passing. I was not even able to go to her funeral because I had to choose between taking the only ticket I had for the year or waiting for my leave days to accumulate so I could spend more**

time with my family. Faced with this impossible situation in a time of great grief, I chose to stay in Nairobi, and I still hate myself for that because I will never get that moment back. I chose my job with a company that would continue to let me down over my own family.

Dealing with all of this in just the span of a year while being a mother of two was incredibly challenging for me. I had left my eldest daughter in South Africa and needed to take her out of that toxic environment full of grief and sadness, and I also missed her dearly. I contacted HR to help me make preparations to bring her to Nairobi, and they were helpful during the initial stages of the journey. However, problems started when I had to return to South Africa to get my daughter's passport. During that time, I was communicating with HR, but as soon as the passport was issued, I was on my own, as they could not pay for my daughter's flight as they had originally promised.

Since I had to travel back to Nairobi for my 8-week-old infant, I took desperate measures that landed me in debt, which I have to this day never managed to pay off. I was left in the dark about everything – not just the flights but also the immigration process that I had to sort out alone, without the company's help. Sama only provided me with a contact number for a travel agent and another for a person from immigration. They knew I was a foreigner and unfamiliar with the Kenyan immigration system. Doing all that alone, I ended up in debt for over 100 thousand Kenyan Shillings (750 USD).

I blamed myself for poor planning and continued to have faith that the company I worked for was at least as humane as they had promised. It was disheartening to discover that we did not yet know how challenging it gets when working for a BPO like Sama.

In the year 2023, I was a new mother of two, with both children now living with me in Nairobi. I was overjoyed, but soon, that joy would turn into a blast of tears. What happened in January 2023 was an unexpected blow, as the company announced layoffs. My whole team was affected, as the project that employed

us would now be closed. This meant that all the expats were supposed to return to their home countries, leaving most of us shocked. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. The plans I had so carefully laid out for my family's future crumbled before my eyes, leaving me lost and adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

Besides being mentally broken by the workload we had to deal with on a daily basis, the thought of being unemployed with two kids shattered me into pieces. Throughout my life, I had always had some sort of income, and now I was stuck in a different country with no income, entirely depending on my partner's earnings to sustain our family. And then, as if the universe had not dealt me enough cruel blows, my four-month-old daughter fell gravely ill. Watching her tiny body hooked up to machines in the critical care unit, I felt my world collapsing around me. While my child was in the hospital in critical care, I feared for her life as each day passed. The days seemed longer because her condition was not improving for a very long time. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the company had switched us to a cheaper medical insurance that restricted which hospitals we could go to. The hospital my daughter went to several times could not diagnose her condition until it was too late, and she was in critical condition.

I soon found out that throughout my entire employment the company was deducting payments for The National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF), which was supposed to cover medical expenses not included in our insurance such as the cost of a hospital bed. However, when I tried to claim the money deducted from my paycheck for over a year, I was told that Sama had stopped making payments just three months after I arrived in the country. The betrayal was so profound and utterly devastating that I could barely breathe.

This revelation left my world standing still, especially as the bills for my daughter kept piling up every day. In desperation, I reached out to the company, pleading for answers about the missing NHIF funds. But my cries for help were met with a deafening silence. HR and management alike left me on

read, ignoring my messages as if I were nothing more than an inconvenient ghost. It was a brutal reminder of how little I meant to them and how easily they could discard me after all I had sacrificed. To this day, I am thankful for the support of my family and friends. The hospital bill was paid in full, and my daughter managed to leave the hospital healthy. But the scars left by this company are of betrayal and will never fully heal.

The realization that, effective March 2023, we were being discarded like used spare parts, after all of our sacrifices and dedication, was a bitter pill to swallow. The measly severance packages they offered felt like a slap in the face, a final insult. These emotions of pain and disorientation helped the employees find their voice, and we decided to stand together and fight against Meta and all the outsourced companies that they were planning to replace us with. This led to a lawsuit against Meta, with most employees signing and joining the petition to help stop the layoffs, or at least fight to receive decent mental healthcare after being fired, and a fair severance package that would not be decided by the company's might.

Despite the court case being underway from April 2023 until today, and even after the judge told the company to continue paying us, Sama disregarded all court orders, including providing desperately needed mental health care for employees.

With no place to go and no way for us to return home, Sama refused to issue flight tickets for us international workers unless we accepted their paltry severance package. The lack of financial support in a foreign country caused immense distress and anguish to those of us who remained stranded in Nairobi with no way of returning to our loved ones.

I could never bring myself to accept the meager severance package they offered us. I had to think about the future of my two precious children. The fact that I have to live with all this trauma for the rest of my life is reason enough for me to never settle for the mere pennies that the company offered us. No amount of money can erase the scars I carry.



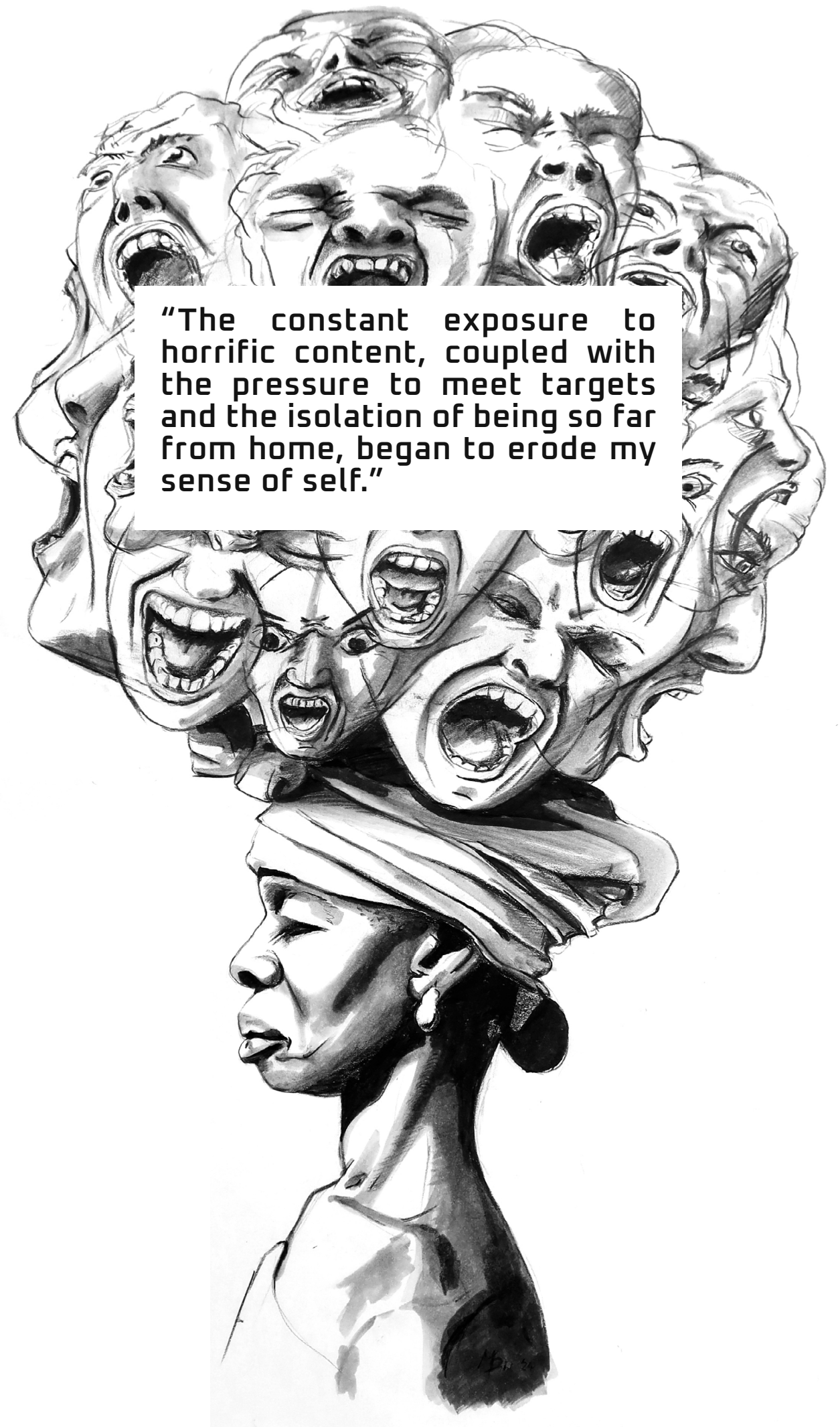
JESSICA JOSEPH

Jessica is a 31-year-old mother of two from a small town on the outskirts of Johannesburg, South Africa called Tukies. It is close to Potchefstroom town, a very farm-like area in the outskirts of the noisy city.

Jessica is from a traditional Afrikaans coloured home. She was raised by her mother and grandmother. These two remarkable women, who had weathered their own share of life's storms, instilled in Jessica the values of hard work, resilience, and unwavering love for family. From a young age, she learned that success was not handed out freely but earned through dedication and perseverance. It was a lesson that would serve her well in the coming years as she navigated the challenges of single motherhood and the search for a better future.

After completing high school, Jessica worked in various areas and learned how to trade and bake. Her dedication allowed her to sustain herself and her growing family. As a single mother, Jessica's world revolved around her children. When her daughter was born, she worked tirelessly to ensure that she could give her the best possible life. A few years later, when her son arrived, Jessica knew that she needed to find a more stable source of income. The South African economy was unpredictable, and relying on it was not a risk she could afford to take.

Jessica turned to technology in her search for better opportunities. She discovered the P-Net app, a platform that connected job seekers with potential employers. It was through this app that she first came across the content moderation job that would change the course of her life. Little did she know that the job's promise of stability and a brighter future would



"The constant exposure to horrific content, coupled with the pressure to meet targets and the isolation of being so far from home, began to erode my sense of self."

come at a steep cost, one that would test her resilience and strength in ways she could never have imagined.

"With an eagerness to learn and grow, I jumped at the opportunity to work in Nairobi, Kenya, even though I knew very little about the country or the job," Jessica recalls. The job advertisement on P-Net promised a competitive salary, a chance to explore a new country, and the opportunity to be part of a cutting-edge industry. It seemed like a dream come true for Jessica and many other young people who were desperate for a better future. However, as Jessica progressed through the recruitment process, she found herself faced with more questions than answers. The interviews were brief and vague, with the recruiters glossing over the specifics of the job. "They kept using terms like 'content moderation' and 'ensuring a safe online environment' but never really explained what that entailed," Jessica remembers. "I tried to ask for more details, but I was always met with the same generic responses"

Despite the lack of clarity, Jessica remained hopeful. "I tried to do my own research, but the only information I could find about content moderation was through a quick Google search," she explains. "Even that barely scratched the surface. The search results failed to convey the graphic, disturbing nature of the content we would be exposed to on a daily basis. It was a crucial omission that left us wholly unprepared for the mental and emotional toll of the job."

Jessica arrived in Nairobi in 2021 during the coronavirus pandemic, without her children. She was taken to work at the temporary offices Sama had organized for the employees. The lodge was located in a remote area. Jessica and her colleagues spent approximately six months living and working in this isolated environment. As the pandemic continued to grip the world, the company eventually transitioned its employees to a work-from-home setup. Jessica found herself moving to Embakasi, an area that was close to the main office. The company required all employees to reside within a 12.5km radius of the office.

However, the change in the work environment did little to alleviate the draining nature of the job. Jessica found that working from home was just as exhausting as working from the office. The graphic content she was exposed to seemed to intensify during the pandemic, as more people turned to the internet to cope with the global crisis.

The nature of the work, which involves constant exposure to disturbing and graphic content, can quickly take a toll on even the strongest individuals. However, the companies often fail to provide adequate support, leaving their employees overstimulated, overworked, and vulnerable to developing toxic coping mechanisms. Jessica fell into this trap, as the unrelenting stress of the job and the financial obligations she struggled to meet pushed her to the brink. "I started losing myself in the process of working in this environment," she confesses. "The constant exposure to horrific content, coupled with the pressure to meet targets and the isolation of being so far from home, began to erode my sense of self."

To cope with the emotional toll of the job, Jessica turned to unhealthy eating habits and alcohol. "I had no control over my emotions, and being so far from my children and family only added to the pressure," she admits. "I found myself drinking more, trying to forget about the content I had to watch and the ache of missing my kids. But at the end of the day, alcohol did not solve any of my problems. It only masked the pain temporarily while slowly destroying me from the inside."

Jessica's story is not unique. Many of her colleagues found themselves in a similar spiral, desperately seeking ways to numb the emotional pain and maintain their sanity in the face of an unrelenting onslaught of disturbing content.

Besides the emotional strain inherent to the nature of the work, many of our co-workers' personal lives were also affected by being away from their families. Jessica faced this challenge as well. She had left her 7-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son in the care of her grandmother and mother. Being separated from her children for more than three years, Jessica struggled

to feel like a true mother to them. The meager vacation time of only two weeks per year was woefully inadequate, as it barely allowed for the time needed to travel to South Africa and spend any meaningful time with her loved ones. This left her with an impossible choice between her responsibilities as a mother and her commitment to her job.

Jessica had planned to bring her children to Nairobi before Sama ended all content moderation employment with a mass layoff. However, when the time came for her to act on these plans, the management team, who had once seemed so supportive and accommodating, suddenly became unreachable. Calls and emails went unanswered, and Jessica was left to navigate the complex international relocation process on her own.

The impact on Jessica's parenting experience was profound. The physical distance between her and her children was already a source of immense emotional strain, but the added weight of Sama's broken promises and lack of support made it almost unbearable. She found herself questioning the sacrifices she had made, wondering if the price of pursuing her career was too high.

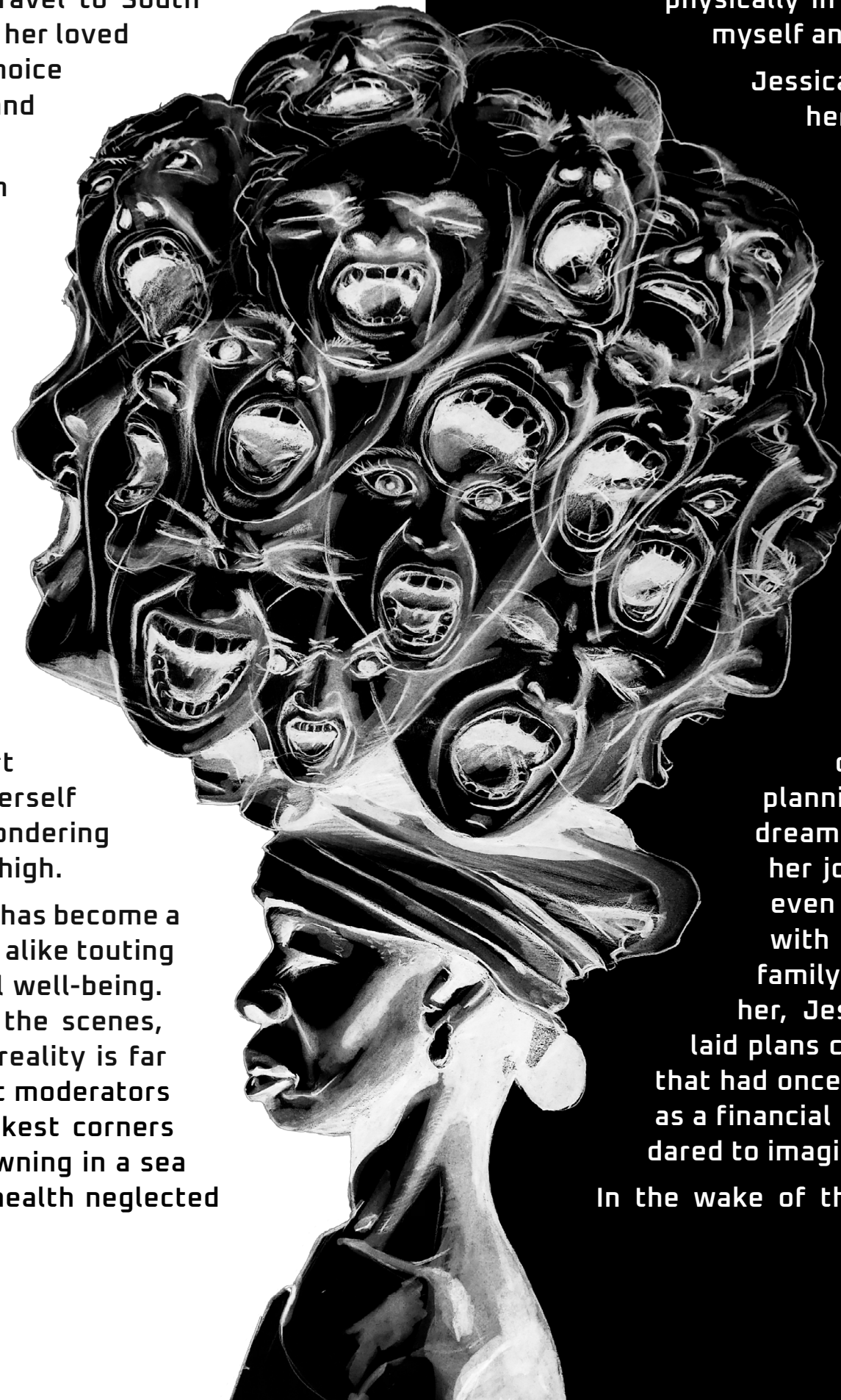
In the realm of social media, mental health has become a buzzword, with companies and influencers alike touting the importance of self-care and emotional well-being. However, for the people working behind the scenes, like Jessica, me, and our colleagues, the reality is far from this carefully curated image. Content moderators tasked with shielding users from the darkest corners of the internet often find themselves drowning in a sea of sorrow and trauma, their own mental health neglected

and overlooked. Jessica's words paint a haunting picture of this work's toll on her: "The job has affected me mentally and physically in the worst possible way. I do not feel like myself anymore."

Jessica had become used to the annual renewal of her contract while working for the company. However, in November 2022, instead of the usual 12-month extension, she was handed a mere 3-month contract. The abrupt change came as a shock, but her concerns were initially allayed by reassurances from management, who told her not to worry. But as the new year dawned, the true extent of the company's plans became clear. In a gloomy meeting, Jessica and her colleagues were informed that their contracts would not be renewed at all. The company was issuing redundancy notices across the board, effectively leaving their entire workforce jobless in one fell swoop.

For Jessica, the news was nothing short of devastating. She had been meticulously planning to bring her children to Nairobi, a dream fuelled by the promises and stability of her job. In preparation for their arrival, she had even moved into a larger home, a space filled with the hope and anticipation of reuniting her family. Now, with the rug pulled out from under her, Jessica watched helplessly as her carefully laid plans crumbled before her eyes. The bigger home that had once represented a brighter future now loomed as a financial burden, a cruel reminder of the life she had dared to imagine for herself and her children.

In the wake of the sudden job loss, Jessica found herself



unemployed and stranded in a foreign country, unable to return home as the legal battle over the company's actions commenced. She describes this as the darkest chapter in her life, drowning in debt and unable to provide for her children in the way she had always envisioned.

Confronted with the reality of returning home empty-handed and compelled to rely on the support of her own parents, Jessica's once vibrant dreams for the future now seem faint and far off. Yet, even amidst this gloom, she holds fast to a flicker of hope. With a heart brimming with love and a spirit that refuses to yield, Jessica clings to the conviction that, in the end, everything will fall into place.

NONTOKOZO DLAMINI

"I had big dreams, but in a place like Mpumalanga, dreams often get lost in the coal dust." This is the story of Nontokozo Dlamini, a 27-year-old single mother from a small town in South Africa called Mpumalanga, where the only real work is in the mines. Life there is not easy. Most people spend their days deep underground, digging for coal to keep the country's lights on. But Nontokozo wanted more than that. She dreamed of seeing the world and finding a job that would allow her to grow and learn new things. But jobs like that are hard to find in a place where the mines are the only game in town. Nontokozo knew that to make her dreams come true, she would have to look elsewhere. That's what led her to Nairobi, Kenya, at 23, hoping to find the opportunity she had been looking for.

In Nairobi, Kenya, she initially took on the role of a call center agent. This position differed significantly from the actual job she would be engaging in: content moderation. Nontokozo was recruited by a Sama agent. With optimism, she took a leap of faith and accepted the job. As she transitioned to the production floor, the overwhelming workload and the number of tickets to be reviewed daily overtook her.

In 2020, after a year of being an employee at the company, Nontokozo was due to give birth to a baby boy. She decided to deliver in South Africa, with the intention of bringing her newborn son back to Nairobi. The company helped her with this by prepaying for her son's plane ticket, but this seeming act of generosity came with a catch: the cost would be deducted from her salary on a monthly basis.

As a new mother navigating parenthood alone in a foreign

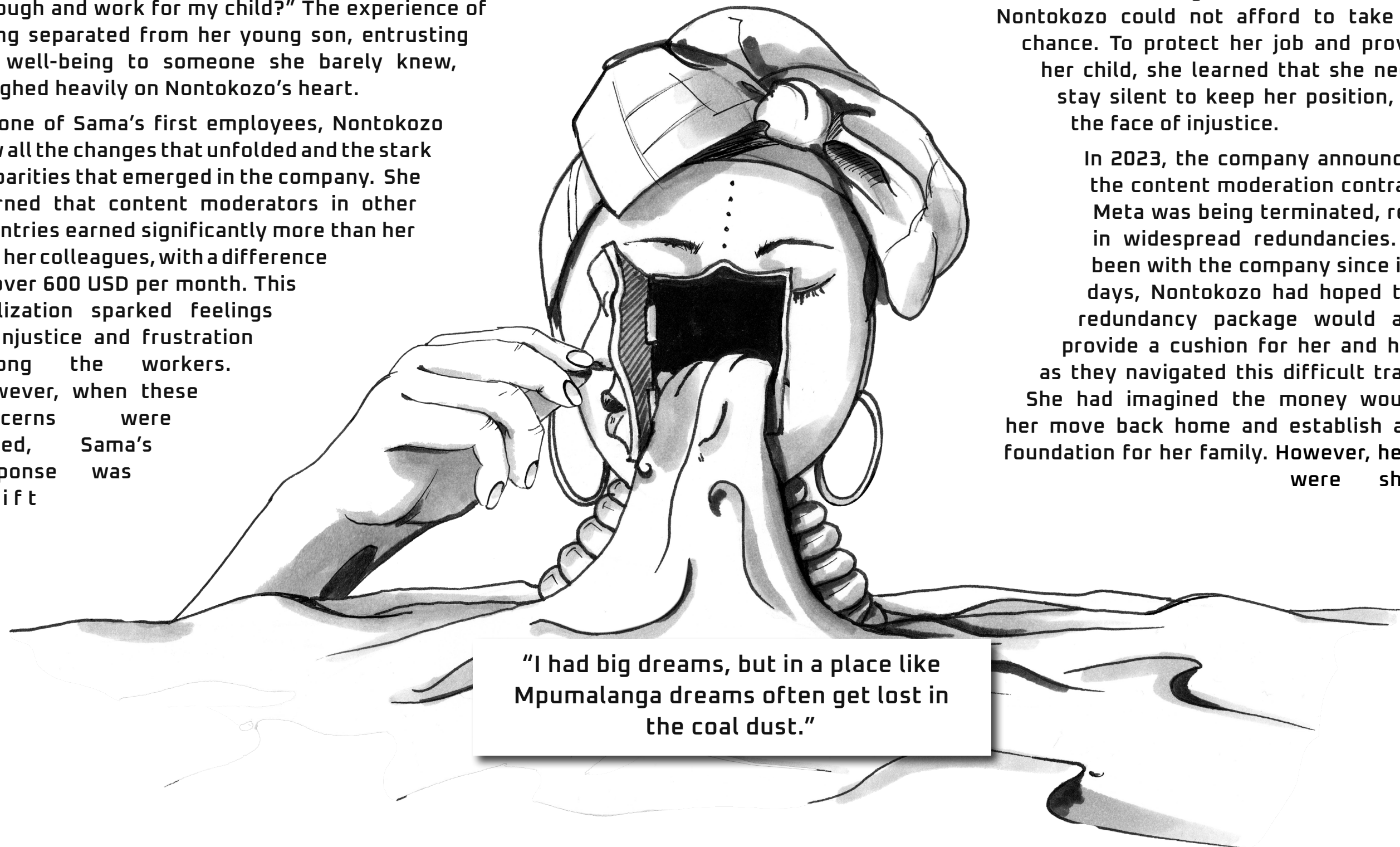
city, she had to hire a nanny to help her with the child due to the working shifts that were constant and rotated every two weeks. Despite pleading to remain on the day shift, her request fell on deaf ears. In some instances, she was made to work the night shift even as a new mother, leaving her then 5-month-old baby alone with a stranger at home. The emotional toll was immense, as she recounts, "this left me depressed as I hated leaving my child with a stranger but at this point what choice did I have except just having to stick it through and work for my child?" The experience of being separated from her young son, entrusting his well-being to someone she barely knew, weighed heavily on Nontokoza's heart.

As one of Sama's first employees, Nontokoza saw all the changes that unfolded and the stark disparities that emerged in the company. She learned that content moderators in other countries earned significantly more than her and her colleagues, with a difference of over 600 USD per month. This realization sparked feelings of injustice and frustration among the workers. However, when these concerns were raised, Sama's response was swift

and ruthless. Instead of addressing the issue, the company resorted to threats and acts of retaliation. [Daniel Motaung](#), one of the most vocal workers who had taken on the role of spokesperson, was abruptly fired under the pretext of bullying. To his colleagues, it was a blatant attempt to silence dissent and maintain the status quo.

All the employees who stood by him and believed that they were being mistreated and underpaid were also threatened with being fired. As a new mother, Nontokoza could not afford to take such a chance. To protect her job and provide for her child, she learned that she needed to stay silent to keep her position, even in the face of injustice.

In 2023, the company announced that the content moderation contract with Meta was being terminated, resulting in widespread redundancies. Having been with the company since its early days, Nontokoza had hoped that the redundancy package would at least provide a cushion for her and her child as they navigated this difficult transition. She had imagined the money would help her move back home and establish a stable foundation for her family. However, her hopes were shattered



when the reality of the situation became clear. With 150,000 Kenyan shillings (less than 1,000 USD), the package offered by Sama was not what she had hoped for, leaving Nontokoza and many of her colleagues on the brink of financial ruin. They found themselves abandoned, left to fend for themselves and their children, while the company faced a barrage of lawsuits from employees alleging unfair dismissals and other grievances.

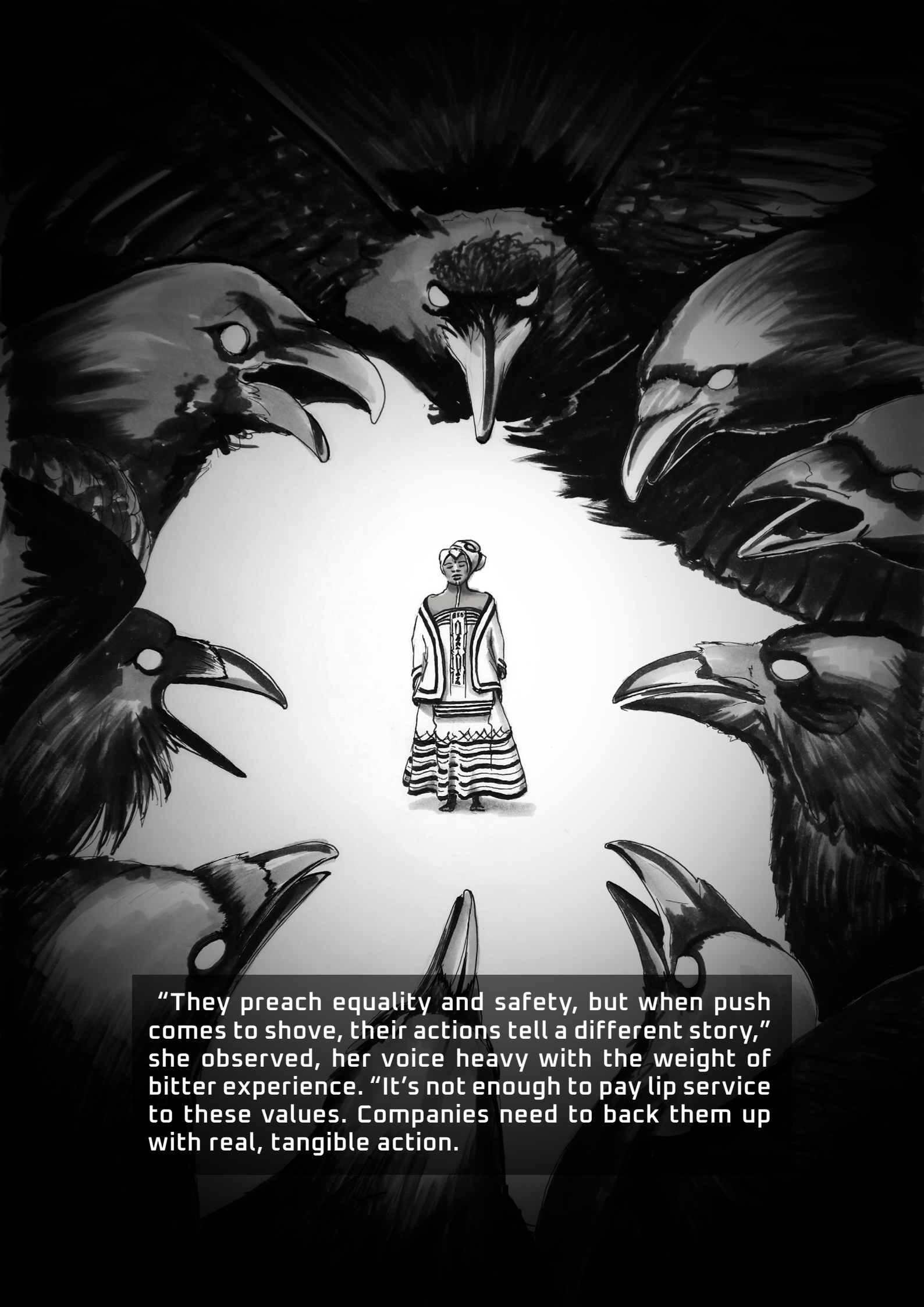
The impact was particularly devastating for Nontokoza and the other parents among her colleagues. They were left not only broke but also broken mentally, struggling to come to terms with the sudden loss of their livelihoods and the uncertainty of their futures.

Despite a court order mandating that the company continue paying its employees until the resolution of the ongoing legal case, Nontokoza and her colleagues have been left without income since the announcement of the redundancies. Nontokoza and her fellow content moderators are not only left to struggle financially but also to grapple with the profound emotional and psychological toll of their experiences. The scars left by their time in this industry will likely last a lifetime, affecting their well-being and that of their families and communities.

JABULILE MSHENGU

To be a woman in South Africa is to live in a constant state of battle. The country's staggering rates of gender-based violence have earned it the haunting distinction of being the "rape capital of the world," a title that speaks to the pervasive and unrelenting threat faced by women in every aspect of their lives. According to the South African Police Service's 2019/2020 crime statistics, a [woman is raped every 26 seconds in the country](#), a figure that experts believe is likely an underestimation due to the high rates of underreporting. The specter of femicide looms large, as well, with countless women losing their lives to intimate partner violence and other forms of gendered aggression. It is no wonder, then, that many women see leaving the country as their only hope for a life free from the constant fear of violence and violation. But even as they seek to escape this grim reality, South African women must also contend with the daily struggles of unemployment, gender inequality, and racism, fighting for their basic rights and dignity on multiple fronts. In a country where women's bodies and lives are so often treated as disposable, the battle for survival and respect is one that must be waged every single day.

Jabulile Mshengu is a hardworking 27-year-old woman from South Africa. She is originally from Nelspruit but currently based in Johannesburg. She is a force to be reckoned with, a woman whose confidence and entrepreneurial spirit have propelled her to success in various ventures. From teaching others the ins-and-outs of trading to running her own thriving cosmetics business, she has never been one to shy away from



"They preach equality and safety, but when push comes to shove, their actions tell a different story," she observed, her voice heavy with the weight of bitter experience. "It's not enough to pay lip service to these values. Companies need to back them up with real, tangible action."

a challenge or an opportunity. So, when her brother presented her with the chance to move to Nairobi, Kenya, Jabulile didn't hesitate. She saw it as a way to expand her existing businesses and gain valuable experience working a stable job in a new country.

With her trademark determination and optimism, she embraced the move wholeheartedly, eager to see where this new chapter would take her. Little did she know, however, that the challenges she would face in Nairobi would test her in ways she never could have imagined, forcing her to confront the dark realities of gender-based violence head-on.

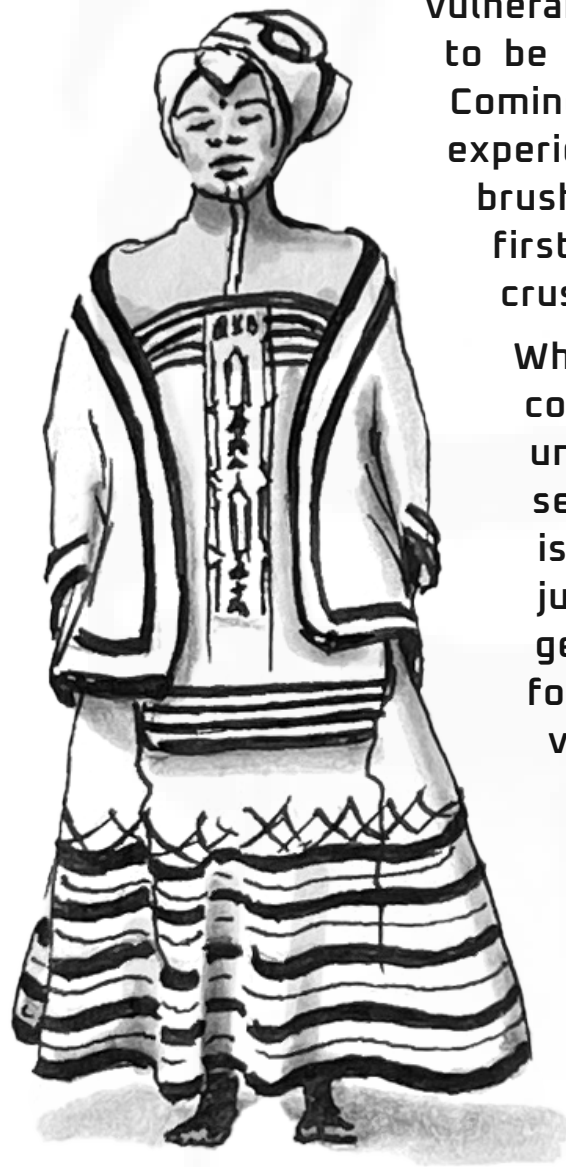
At Sama, most workers preferred to keep their heads down, as being vocal about their unhappiness or anything that may be unsettling could lead to job loss. However, for a strongly vocal person like Jabulile, staying silent was nearly impossible. "Women were struggling to be heard when they raised factors that could improve the working environment for them," Jabulile recounts, remembering how she always had to fight for her voice to be heard even about the smallest of situations, such as providing emergency sanitary pads. Despite her efforts, the company continuously dismissed her concerns.

In June 2023, a friend and colleague asked Jabulile if he could come over to her place, claiming he wanted to detox from drinking too much that evening. Being a trusting friend, Jabulile allowed him to visit. However, what was meant to be an innocent and helpful gesture turned into a nightmare. Despite Jabulile's lack of sexual intentions that evening, the colleague forced himself on her and raped her, shattering her trust and sense of security.

This traumatic event led to a series of heartbreaking situations. Jabulile, in shock and distress, ran to her neighbor's place to get help and report the assault. To her horror, she discovered that the same man had also raped her neighbour, Thembekile, who was not only a close friend but also a colleague at Sama. When the two women decided to report the incident, they first contacted one of the managers at the company. However, their

claims were quickly dismissed. Despite this lack of support, Jabulile persevered and filed a report with the police.

Upon learning about the rape, the company's managers insisted on handling the matter internally, despite Jabulile not being the first colleague to be raped by the same employee. She felt that the company failed to stand by her and the police in their efforts to locate the perpetrator or provide her with adequate psychological support beyond mere wellness calls. After Jabulile's parents threatened to involve the embassy, the company finally granted her time off from work and one single session with a professional psychologist.



Jabulile felt utterly betrayed and vulnerable in a city that was supposed to be her sanctuary, her safe haven. Coming from a country where women's experiences are routinely dismissed and brushed aside, having this happening firsthand was a gut-wrenching, soul-crushing blow.

When asked about what companies could do better to handle the unspeakable horrors of rape and sexual assault, Jabulile's response is a fierce, unwavering cry for justice: "It starts with providing genuine, comprehensive support for the victim," she declared, her voice trembling with a potent mix of determination and frustration. "But it can't end there. Companies need to hold the predators accountable, no matter who they are or what position they hold. Too often, these incidents are brushed under the rug, covered up to

protect the company's reputation rather than the safety and well-being of the employees."

Jabulile's words are a searing indictment of the rank hypocrisy that infects so many companies, particularly in the social media and technology industries. "They preach equality and safety, but when push comes to shove, their actions tell a different story," she observed, her voice heavy with the weight of bitter experience. "It's not enough to pay lip service to these values. Companies need to back them up with real, tangible action. They need to create a culture where victims feel supported and believed, and where perpetrators face real consequences for their actions."

The story of Jabulile's experiences at Sama is a harrowing, heart-wrenching reminder of the desperate need for change in the way companies handle the scourge of sexual violence and harassment in the workplace. It is a clarion call to action for all of us, as workers, consumers, and members of society, to demand better from the organizations that shape our world. We must hold them accountable, not just for their empty words but for their concrete actions. We must insist on a culture of true equality, safety, and respect for all workers, regardless of their gender, race, or position. We must stand with the victims, amplify their voices, and fight tirelessly until justice is served and the cycle of abuse is finally broken.

JOYCE AMUGE

Joyce's story is one of determination and sacrifice. As a mother of two from Uganda, a country that is ranked as one of the poorest in the world with a high inflation rate, Joyce was driven to provide for her children by any means necessary. When she heard about a job opportunity at Sama through a friend, she didn't hesitate to apply, despite the heartbreaking decision to leave her one-year-old son in the care of her mother. With unemployment rampant in Uganda, Joyce saw this chance as a lifeline. She successfully passed through all three interview stages, secured the position, and made the journey to Kenya where the stronger currency promised better financial support for her family back home. However, she soon discovered the harsh reality many content moderators face: limited opportunities and a lack of upward mobility. Joyce found herself stuck in the same position, with no clear path forward, a situation that left her feeling trapped and unsupported. "I wish these companies would invest in their workers' development," Joyce reflects, her voice tinged with frustration. "Instead of just using us until we burn out and then discarding us, they should provide opportunities for growth and help us recover from the toll this job takes on our mental health."

With Joyce's mental health already strained from regularly encountering distressing content, it took a steep decline when she became a mother for the second time. The gruesome nature of her work, combined with the lack of support from the company, left Joyce struggling to cope with the demands of motherhood and her own emotional well-being. The only

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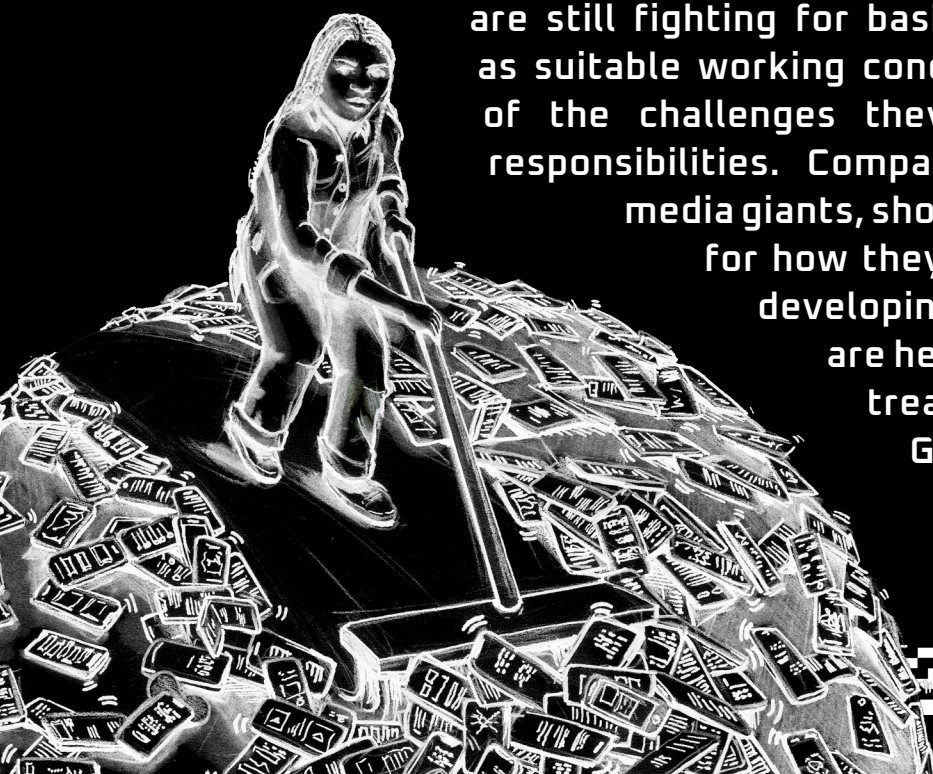


however, support from the company for mothers is very limited. Joyce and her fellow mothers were still required to work demanding shifts, even though these shifts can be particularly draining. Joyce mentions that many mothers quit because of the strain of the job. Mothers who leave their children behind in their home countries are heavily affected by this, finding it extremely difficult to adjust to motherhood after experiencing trauma.

“Mental health should not be an afterthought but a central issue for content moderation companies. Instead of constantly looking for ways to cut costs within the company, they should have invested in the well-being of their workers,” Joyce says.

When asked what could be done to improve the working experience for mothers, Joyce suggested establishing a daycare within the workplace for mothers with newborns and small children. She also proposed implementing a mental health assessment for every mother returning to work after maternity leave, emphasizing its importance alongside the retraining mothers receive upon their return. Another important consideration was the implementation of feasible shifts for mothers, avoiding expectations for continuous night shifts, especially when workers prefer working during the day. Joyce emphasized that having suitable shifts not only benefits the mothers but also makes workers more efficient.

It is disheartening that in the 21st century, mothers are still fighting for basic considerations, such as suitable working conditions and recognition of the challenges they face with childcare responsibilities. Companies, especially social media giants, should be held accountable for how they treat their workers in developing countries, just as they are held accountable for their treatment of employees in Global North nations like the USA.



THEMBEKILE DUBE

As a mother of two from Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa, Thembekile's experiences are shaped by the harsh realities faced by women in her country. South Africa is grappling with a severe teenage pregnancy crisis, with rates reaching alarming levels. The situation is exacerbated by the low legal age of consent for sexual activity, set at just 12 years old, and the country's persistently high rates of rape. Being a woman in South Africa is a constant battle, with challenges at every turn.

In 2021, Thembekile learned about the job opportunity through a family friend and churchmate at her father's church. Trusting the source, she applied for the position without much information, aware only that it involved working for a social media company in content moderation. Despite the low pay, Thembekile was willing to travel and provide for her kids. She remembers, "I was terrified to move to a different country alone without my children, but I believed that God put me on this path for personal and maternal growth."

Like many mothers who applied for the job, Thembekile was promised assistance in bringing her children, but during her employment, all she got was a two-week break to visit home and see her children. "I missed my son's first steps, first words, and second birthday because I wasn't around, and because of that, I don't really feel like a mother to my son," she said. However, the situation was different with Thembekile's daughter who was older and understood that her mother had to work for her and her brother, putting Thembekile at ease.

Working in content moderation made Thembekile realize that

the world can be cruel and that online content can profoundly affect individuals. Adding to this already traumatizing experience, she was sexually assaulted by a co-worker—the same one who would later rape Jabulile. The company did not remove the perpetrator, and both women had to continue working alongside him for several months.

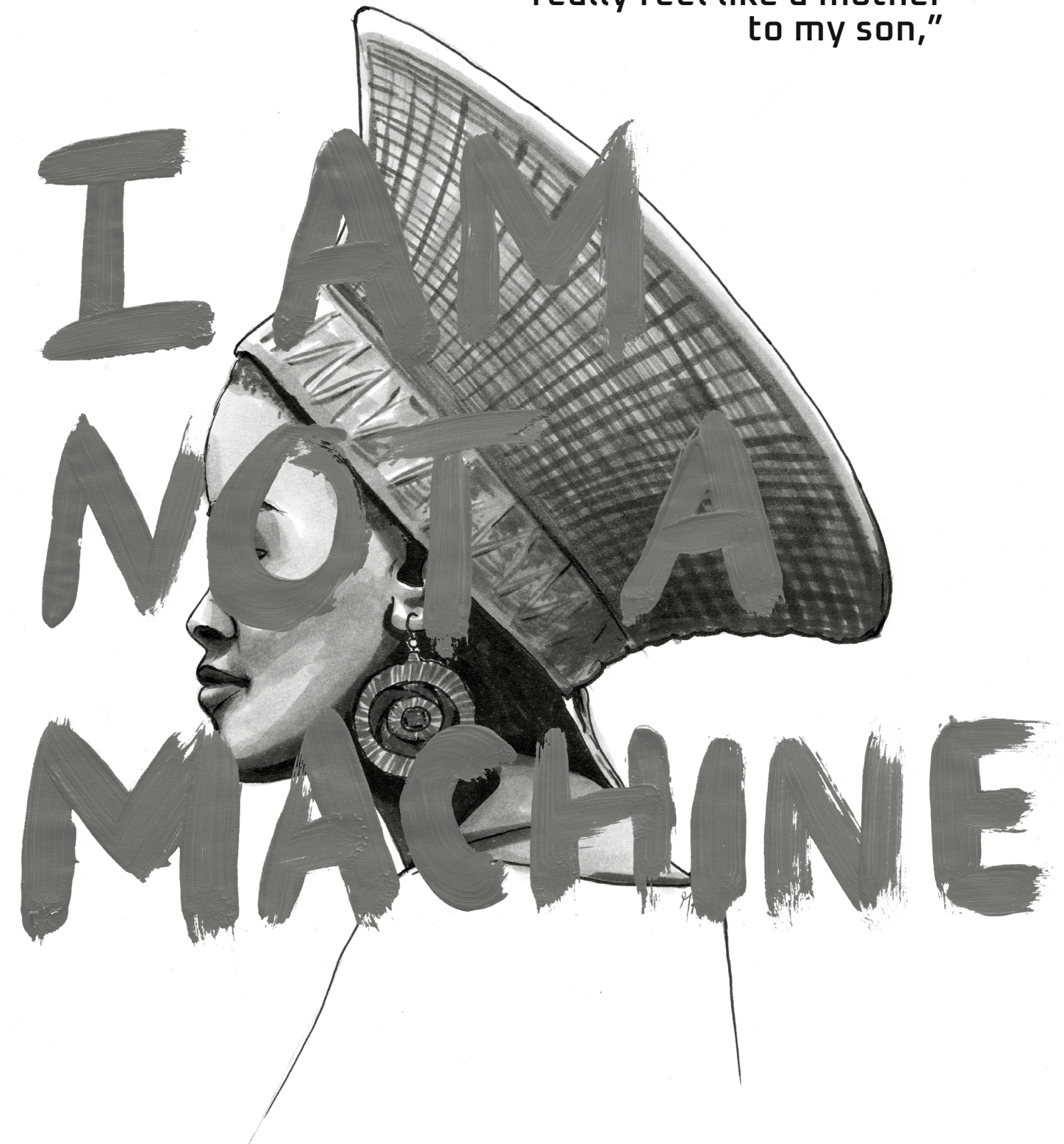
Thembekile's harrowing experience at Sama highlights serious concerns about the company's handling of workers' complaints and its impact on victims like her. Her experience of having to continue working in proximity to the person who had abused her for an extended period of time, raises questions about the company's processes and priorities. While the full details of the situation are not publicly known, incidents like these underscore the importance of companies having robust systems in place to thoroughly investigate serious allegations, protect employee well-being, and take clear corrective steps when warranted.

Victims must be believed, supported, and protected, while perpetrators must face real consequences for their actions. No one should ever have to suffer in silence or feel that their trauma is less important than a company's image. The fact that Thembekile had to endure this nightmare for so long is an indictment of a system that too often fails the most vulnerable. Her courage in speaking out and sharing her story is a powerful call to action, a demand for accountability and change.

We must do better. We must create a world where survivors are heard, believed, and supported, and where no one has to face the unimaginable pain of working alongside their abuser. Thembekile's story is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unspeakable trauma, and a reminder of the work that still needs to be done to build a society where every person can feel safe, respected, and valued. Being a woman in content moderation showed Thembekile that some men could get away with actions that women couldn't get away with.

Sama's limited assistance during hardships faced by migrant workers led Thembekile to go on a downward spiral, ultimately

"I missed my son's first steps, first words, and second birthday because I wasn't around, and because of that, I don't really feel like a mother to my son,"



to otherwise unfamiliar substances. "I wish I could change some things, but honestly, we live and we learn," Thembekile says.

For Thembekile, returning home to South Africa and resuming her role as a mother while seeking employment has proven to be very difficult. The country's current economic climate has made finding stable, full-time work extremely challenging. The available jobs are mostly part-time, offering little in the way of financial security or long-term security. To make matters worse, Thembekile's experience in content moderation, a job that doesn't fit into any traditional field, has added to her problems. In this sense, it is key that content moderation companies provide workers with some form of qualification or certificate of employment to help former employees find jobs in similar fields if they aspire to do so. It's a small step that could make a big difference in the lives of those who have given so much of themselves to these companies, often at great personal cost.



PRECIOUS KALYEGIRA

Many underdeveloped countries, such as Uganda and Kenya, have a robust education system where a significant portion of the population could attain university level education or obtain other professional qualifications. However, finding employment remains extremely challenging even for those who obtain such qualifications. Consequently, young people in these countries often seek opportunities abroad to support their families. Precious, a 30-year-old mother of two from Uganda, found herself in this very situation, leading her to make the difficult decision to leave her home country in search of a better life.

Precious's journey began when she married a Kenyan man and moved to Kenya. She met her husband during her teens and became pregnant at the age of 20 with their first child. However, this did not deter her from pursuing two degrees, one in psychology and one in social work.

In Nairobi, Precious applied to several companies without success. One day, while at church, a fellow church member informed her about a company that was hiring young people from different countries for content moderation. Without knowing the specific details of the job, Precious promptly sent an email to the provided address from her church member. Three days later, she received a positive response from the company.

"To tell the truth, I did not even Google what content moderation was," Precious admits. "I was desperate, having been unemployed for so long, and depending on my husband

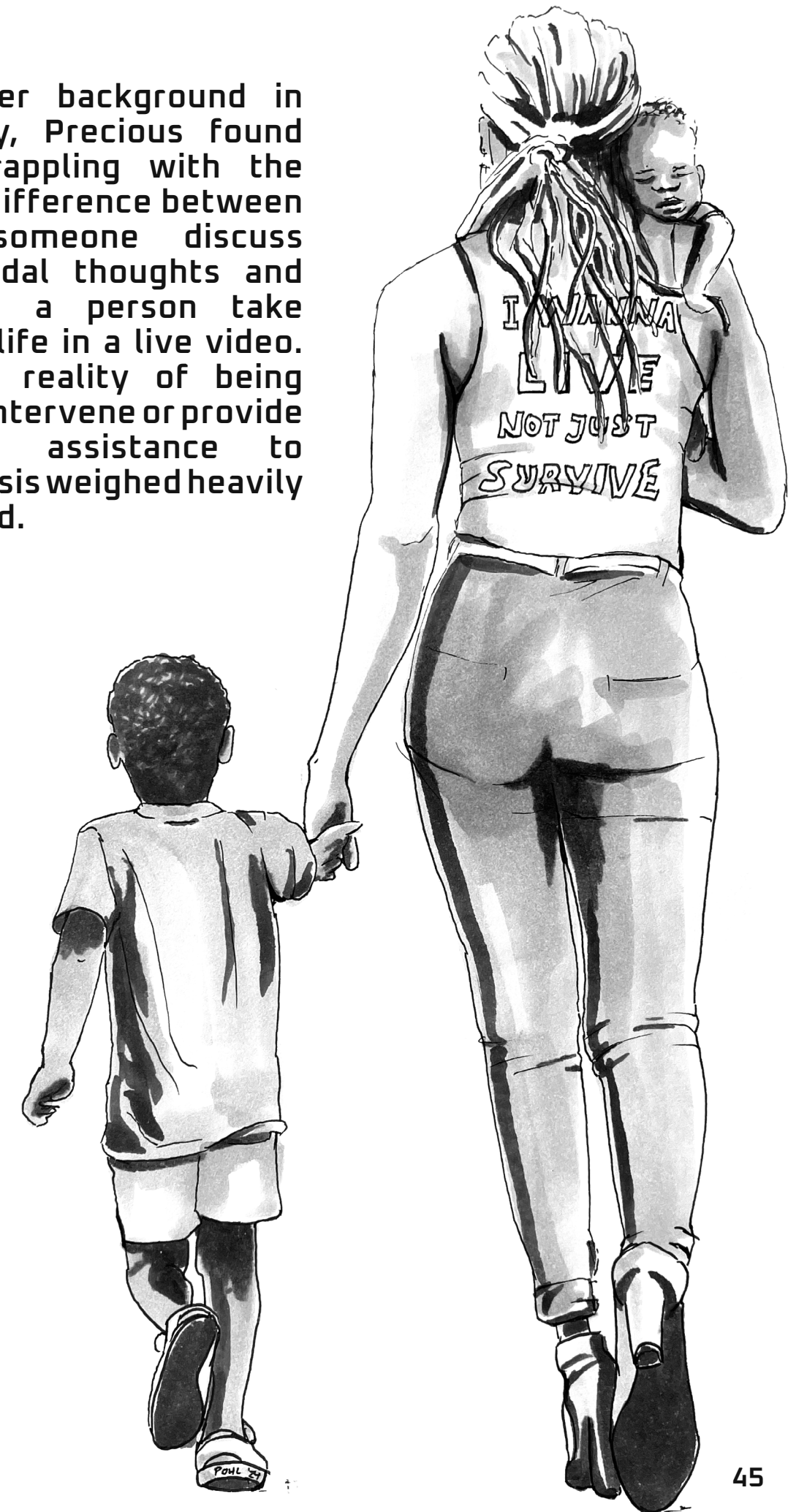
for everything was getting too much for me. I wanted to be independent and support my child the best way I knew how." Going in headfirst, the interviewers provided a short overview of what content moderation is and the types of tasks she would be expected to perform. Being a psychologist, she thought she could handle the job and, at least, grow within the company, given their emphasis on the importance of mental health.

After completing the interviews and training, Precious transitioned into full production, only to discover that her training had woefully failed to prepare her for the sheer volume of gruesome content she would encounter daily. Despite her background in psychology, Precious found herself grappling with the profound difference between hearing someone discuss their suicidal thoughts and witnessing a person take their own life in a live video. The stark reality of being unable to intervene or provide immediate assistance to those in crisis weighed heavily on her mind.

The first year on the job proved to be an immense challenge for Precious. Her primary concern centered around the inadequate qualifications of the well-being counselors provided by the company. During a session with one of the counselors, Precious found herself asking probing questions about their expertise and experience in dealing with the specific traumas faced by content moderators. To her dismay, the counselor's responses revealed a glaring lack of knowledge and understanding. They struggled to provide concrete strategies for coping with the unique psychological impacts of content moderation, leaving Precious feeling frustrated and disheartened.

As someone trained in psychology, Precious noticed that employees struggling with depression and anxiety were not receiving proper care and support. The company and its counselors seemed ill-equipped to comprehend the severity of the mental health issues plaguing their workforce. Many felt that the company often brushed off issues, treating workers as if they were simply inadequate for the job. This callous approach neglected the fact that it was the nature of the work

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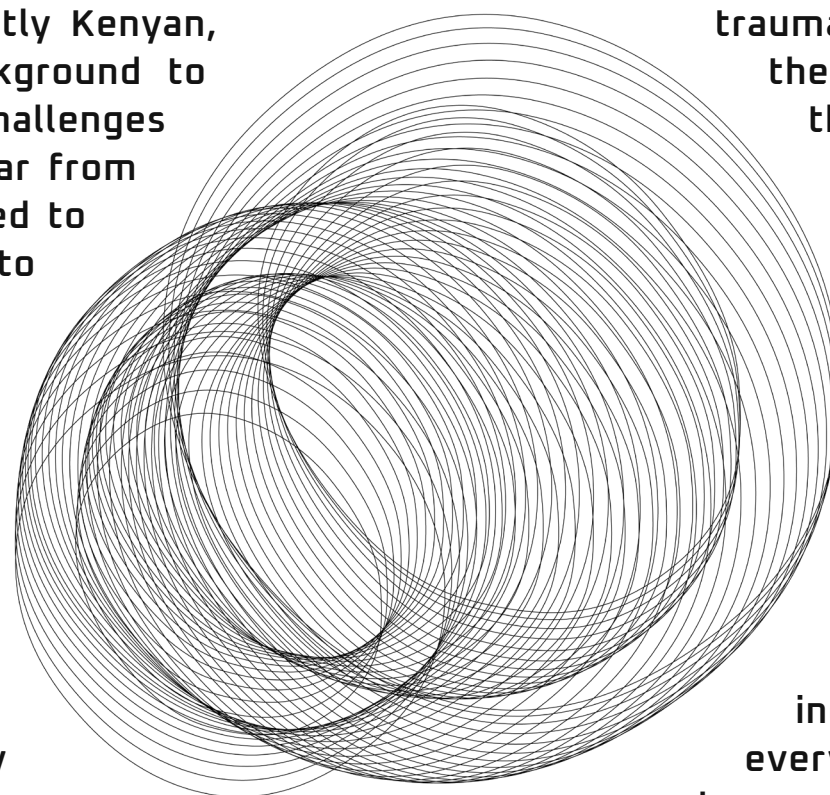


that had prompted feelings of anguish and isolation in many workers.

Compounding the problem was the lack of cultural sensitivity and understanding among the counselors. As a multinational company, Sama's workforce was comprised of individuals from diverse backgrounds and lifestyles, each grappling with horrific content specific to their home countries. The counselors, being predominantly Kenyan, lacked the training and background to fully comprehend the unique challenges faced by workers who were far from their homelands while being exposed to traumatizing content that hit close to home.

Given her background in psychology, Precious took the initiative to reach out to HR, expressing her desire to become a wellness counselor within the company. She hoped to bridge the gap in mental health support and provide her colleagues with the understanding and guidance they so desperately needed. However, her application was swiftly rejected, without any valid explanation. To Precious's dismay, the company hired new counselors who, in her view, were equally underqualified and ill-prepared to handle the unique challenges faced by the content moderation team.

When presented with an internal candidate who possessed both the expertise and the firsthand experience, the company chose to overlook her potential contributions. It became evident to

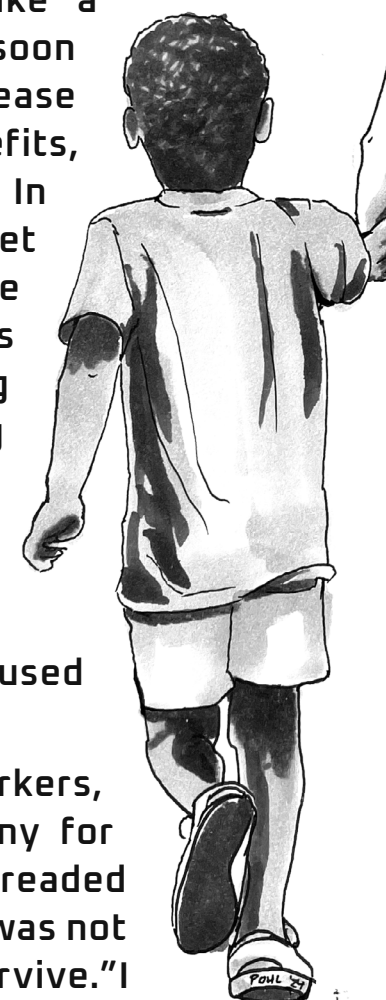


Precious that there was little room for growth or advancement within the organization, even for those who were genuinely passionate and qualified to make a difference. This experience left Precious feeling disheartened and disillusioned.

As if the work-related challenges weren't enough, Precious's personal life took a devastating turn when her husband lost his job. Suddenly, she found herself bearing the weight of being the sole provider for her family, which had grown to include two young children. The combination of the relentless exposure to traumatic content, the inadequate mental health support, the rejection of her efforts to create positive change, and the personal struggles she faced left Precious feeling utterly drained and hopeless.

When the company announced changes to the salary structure, it initially seemed like a positive development. However, it soon became apparent that the salary increase came at the cost of other essential benefits, such as transportation allowances. In the end, the increased salary only offset the transportation costs, making little difference in anyone's life. To make matters worse, the company began implementing increasingly strict policies and micromanaging every aspect of the work environment. The changes, including limitations on wellness breaks and requiring the employees to use their break time for bathroom visits without being compensated for the time, exacerbated the growing sense of being abused and undervalued.

As the company continued to change, many workers, including Precious, who had been with the company for four years, sensed that the end was near. When the dreaded announcement of redundancy finally came, Precious was not shocked but wondered how her family was going to survive. "I remember that day like it was yesterday; after I heard the



news that we were fired, I simply went home, saw my children, and, after seeing them, I sat on my bed and just started crying my eyes out. We were already living paycheck to paycheck, but now the situation was about to become even worse," she recalls. The settlement money offered to the workers was a mere joke, a pittance that only served to compound the sense of betrayal and abandonment that Precious and her colleagues felt.

Precious had no choice but to move back home to Uganda with her two kids, leaving her husband behind to seek employment in Nairobi as they could not both move because they were drowning in debt. The accumulated debt led her to sell all her belongings to pay off the rent owed to her landlord. She also had to rely on money donated by several organizations that had been assisting workers fighting the redundancy in court. Despite the small donations received by everyone involved, Precious has been left with no choice but to start over. Even though the future looks bleak, she looks at her children and believes tomorrow will be better.

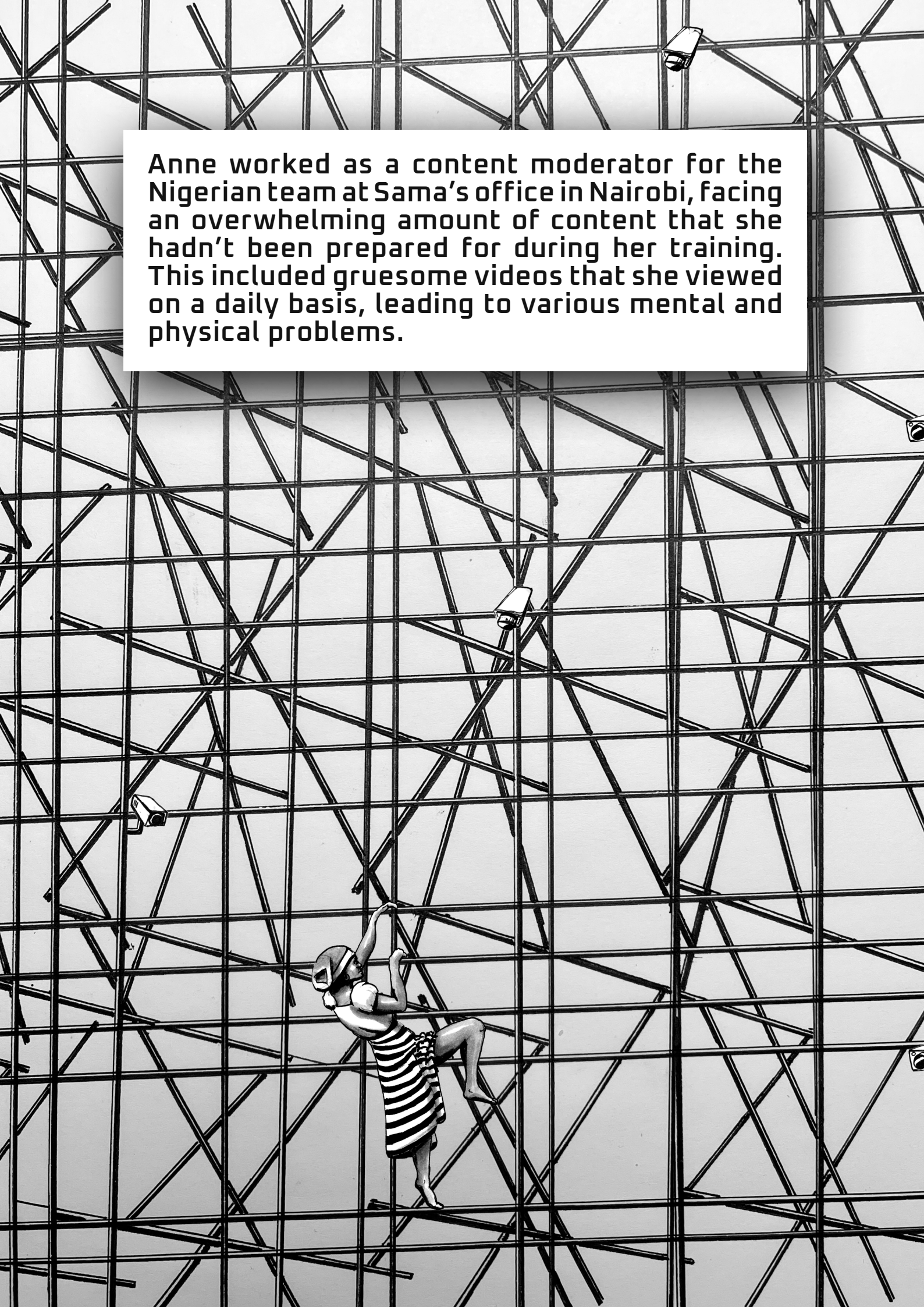
ANNE AJAYI

Anne is a remarkable woman hailing from the vibrant landscapes of Nigeria. At first glance, you can notice that she is a woman who is proud of her culture and embraces every chance she gets to enlighten others about Nigerian culture and flare. Being the strong, independent woman she is, Anne's spirit of being a "hustler" runs through her veins. She is highly creative in finding ways to generate income, and her journey as a content moderator serves as a testament to her resilience and depth.

Anne worked as a content moderator for the Nigerian team at Sama's office in Nairobi, facing an overwhelming amount of content that she hadn't been prepared for during her training. This included gruesome videos that she viewed on a daily basis, leading to various mental and physical problems.

When she started at Sama, her average weight was 63kgs, but within weeks, she shed weight due to depression exacerbated by low blood pressure. This weight loss affected her self-esteem, as she became more self-conscious and faced bullying from some colleagues, particularly the team's quality analyst. Anne recalls being verbally abused and called names like "flat ass" and "slippers breast," which forced her to retreat to the back of the production floor. Meanwhile, she suffered from what she perceived as the unfair marking of her tickets, constantly ending up on the red list due to her appearance at the time. Despite Anne's lack of sleep and appetite, she felt that the company's sole focus was meeting its daily targets, disregarding her well-being.

Being constantly told to forgive and forget being bullied in the workplace, Anne found little support when reporting the matter to HR. But soon after, Anne's medical health took a turn for the worse. She was placed on antidepressants and hospitalized multiple times. Eventually, doctors diagnosed



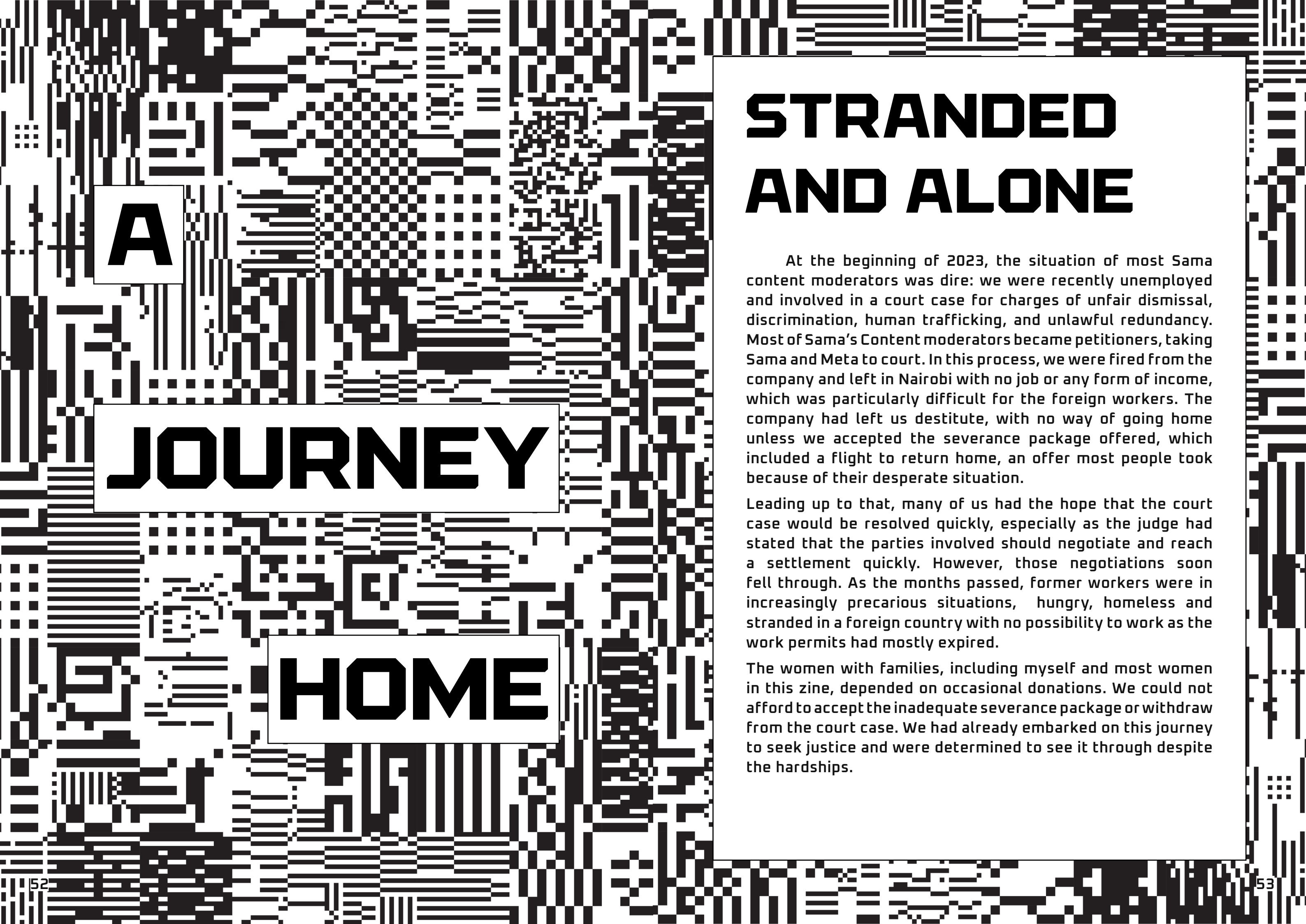
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her with an autoimmune condition caused by the physical stress, the psychological strain, and the medications she was constantly taking to cope with her situation. To manage her condition, doctors prescribed steroids and other drugs, leading Anne to gain weight and causing her body to react in a manner unfamiliar to her.

In May 2022, Anne's doctors recommended that she undergo an open myomectomy, a major surgery. Despite the significant nature of the procedure, Sama only gave her three weeks to heal. When she raised concerns about her inability to work due to her surgery, she was reminded of the importance of "the client": the social media giant, Meta. Unfortunately, Anne had already exhausted all her sick leave days, and any additional time taken off from work would be deducted from her salary.

After Anne exhausted her medical aid funds, she faced significant financial challenges, as the company did not provide additional assistance. As a result, Anne's salary was deducted for approximately two months, and she was required to pay the gynecologist's fees out of pocket. Facing mounting medical bills and lacking family support in the country she was working in, Anne felt that she had no choice but to return to Nigeria to access the medical care and family assistance she needed. She remained there for three weeks.

According to Anne's account, the company's managers did not seem to fully understand or accommodate her medical situation and need for special attention during this time. She states that her requests for support and understanding went unaddressed, and she was not paid for the time she was unable to work due to her health issues. Most notably, Anne recounts that despite the personal nature of her health matters, her sick notes were broadly shared beyond her immediate team leader.



A

JOURNEY

HOME

STRANDED AND ALONE

At the beginning of 2023, the situation of most Sama content moderators was dire: we were recently unemployed and involved in a court case for charges of unfair dismissal, discrimination, human trafficking, and unlawful redundancy. Most of Sama's Content moderators became petitioners, taking Sama and Meta to court. In this process, we were fired from the company and left in Nairobi with no job or any form of income, which was particularly difficult for the foreign workers. The company had left us destitute, with no way of going home unless we accepted the severance package offered, which included a flight to return home, an offer most people took because of their desperate situation.

Leading up to that, many of us had the hope that the court case would be resolved quickly, especially as the judge had stated that the parties involved should negotiate and reach a settlement quickly. However, those negotiations soon fell through. As the months passed, former workers were in increasingly precarious situations, hungry, homeless and stranded in a foreign country with no possibility to work as the work permits had mostly expired.

The women with families, including myself and most women in this zine, depended on occasional donations. We could not afford to accept the inadequate severance package or withdraw from the court case. We had already embarked on this journey to seek justice and were determined to see it through despite the hardships.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The fact that Sama ignored the court order to pay salaries for over a year left workers unable to afford basic needs like shelter and food. Meanwhile, the company's management continued their lives as if nothing was wrong, turning a blind eye to the suffering of those who were once affiliated with them.

We were all struggling with the pressing question of where to go from here. Does one take the package that the company offered and live with the trauma and pain endured during and after our employment? Or do we keep fighting and believing in the court system, even though the process is proving to take longer than expected?

Faith and fear lived in the hearts of every petitioner. Most had faith that justice would prevail, while living in fear of being kicked out by their landlords or being arrested by the police due to the lack of proper documentation—the employees' work permits had expired, and they were not able to move around Nairobi freely. This led to most foreign workers having no choice but to accept the package offered by Sama, or to take out loans from family and friends just to fly home and be safe.

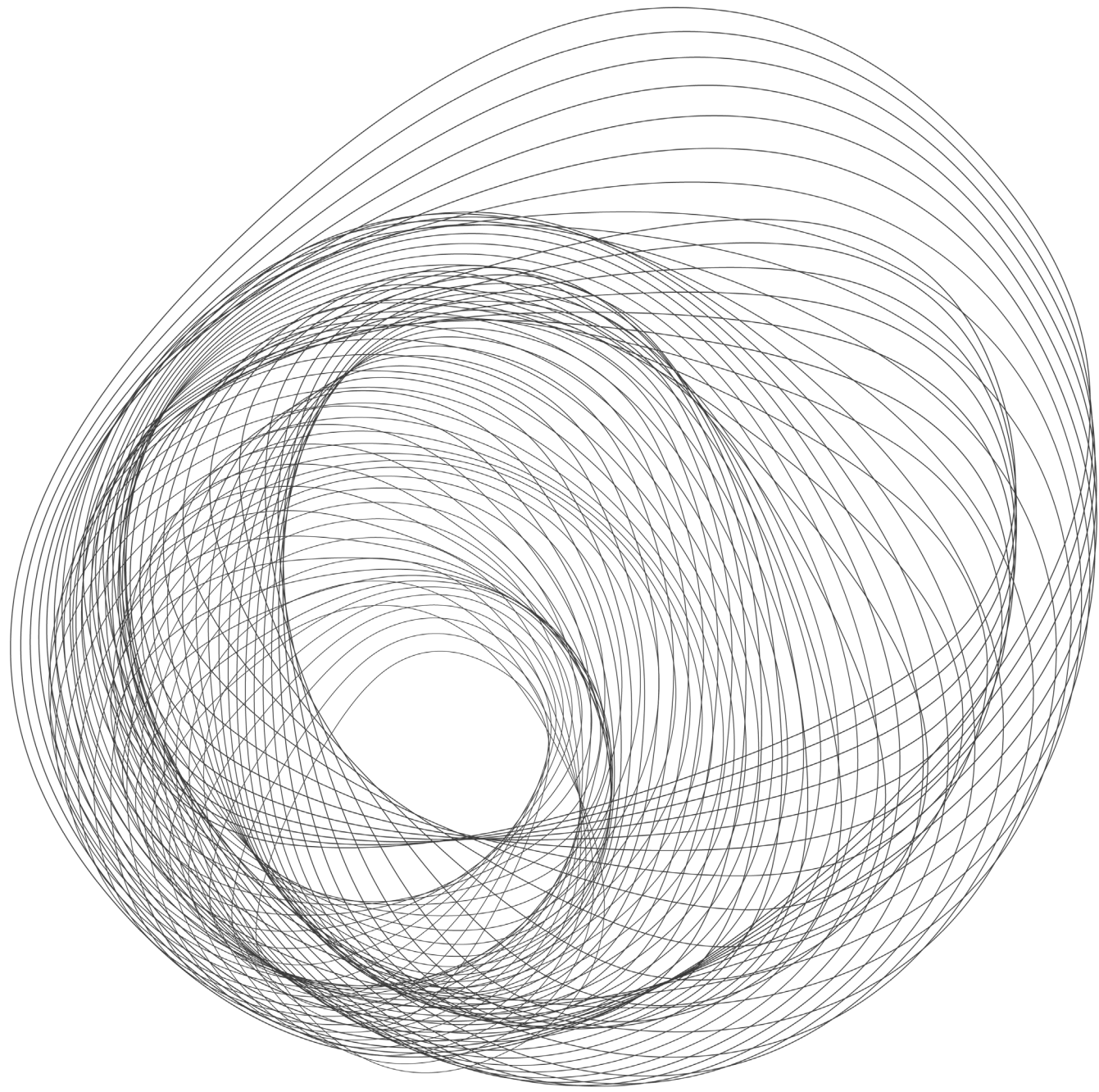
COLLECTIVE SUPPORT AND SOLIDARITY

While working on this zine in October 2023 with Milagros Miceli's assistance, I contacted Julia Kloiber from [Superrr Lab](#), who was actively seeking ways to help the petitioners stranded in Nairobi. During my meeting with Julia, I highlighted the main issue faced by several other women and me: being stuck in Nairobi with no means of returning home to our children. The women featured in this book are just a few examples of those who were in this extremely difficult situation.

Through Mila and Julia, [DAIR](#) and Superrr provided funds to help 11 people return home. The money was used to pay for plane tickets, bus tickets, and outstanding rent to landlords who had confiscated passports. Sharing my own story and those of the women around me who needed to go back home to their children was even more important after getting this life-changing help. None of us believed something like this could happen as we had been suffering for so long without any help except for occasional donations, family handouts, and petty online jobs that we could find.

Joyce from Uganda was able to travel by bus with her one-year-old and was overjoyed when she finally got to see her family again. Jessica was happy to finally be home with her two kids and try to reestablish a connection with them. Nontokozo and her son managed to reach home before Christmas and see their family after enduring months without a salary since March 2023. Jabulile received assistance with her outstanding

rent balance as she moved on from the court case, deciding to focus on her business and her family instead. And by grace, I was finally able to take my children home, thanks to the support provided by organizations like DAIR and Superrr and people like Julia and Mila.



CLOSING REMARKS

Content Moderation is a flawed occupation that needs improvement, as it plays a crucial role in making the world a better place. Instead of hiding this occupation and treating it like a dirty little secret, we should recognise that content moderators are the unsung heroes of social media. Despite being underpaid, overworked, and traumatized, these workers are human beings who deserve support and recognition.

Having worked for Sama over the years, I witnessed many harmful practices. They don't even introduce foreign workers to the basic survival skills needed in a new country. They just leave us to fend for ourselves while preaching equality and empowerment. In reality, we are treated like machines.

The path to change is not just about addressing the negative aspects of the job; it is also about recognising the potential for positive transformation within the content moderation industry. The current petitioners are at the forefront of this change, bravely speaking out about the working conditions faced by content moderators, particularly in Global South countries like Kenya. Their voices are crucial in raising awareness and driving the necessary reforms to ensure fair treatment, adequate support, and dignity for all workers in this field.

Change is already underway, as demonstrated by the recent creation of the African Content Moderators Union which was initially forbidden by our employer. Since the union's formation, extraordinary events have taken place, such as a march to the Sama building where workers presented their list of demands including salary improvements. This showed huge companies like Sama and Meta that workers are not machines. They are human beings who can speak up for themselves even though the companies have repeatedly tried to silence them.

Even with all the trauma and pain, one should not shy away from the job of content moderation as it is saving lives around the world. Although flawed, the industry can be positively changed in several ways to improve job productivity and appreciation.

WHAT SHOULD BE THE CHANGE?

Firstly, there needs to be greater awareness and understanding of what content moderation entails among the general public. There is a scarcity of information on the topic and the job is often shrouded in secrecy. The limited explanations that can be found online do not provide enough details about the true nature of the work and its requirements. To address this issue, companies and recruiters should be more transparent and provide comprehensive information about the job to potential applicants. This includes fully disclosing the challenges and potential risks associated with the role, and ensuring that job seekers can make informed decisions about whether the position is suitable for them. Recruiters should refrain from misrepresenting the job as a simple call center position and instead be upfront about the duties involved in content moderation. By promoting transparency and awareness, we can create a more informed and prepared workforce, ultimately leading to better outcomes for both employees and the industry as a whole.

Secondly, labour outsourcing companies should acknowledge that their current policies do not adequately protect workers' mental health. The interview and screening process should include a psychologist to evaluate and ensure that the person seeking the job is mentally prepared for the challenges they will face. This will determine if they are mentally fit to take on the job, preventing a lot of workers from enduring depression

and having trauma from an entry-level job. After the interview process and during training, the mental health checks should continue to be conducted by qualified psychologists to help the employee transition from training to full production.

Thirdly, there needs to be full disclosure of the salary expectations after tax for countries that have high tax deductions, including all the deductions that are made by the company. This information would be helpful for job seekers to know what to expect. When hiring people from abroad, it is essential to inform them about the living expenses in the new country. If possible, the company should provide housing for foreign employees or provide a subsidy for housing. Additionally, salaries should be competitive and in line with the standards of their American-based companies. Companies should pay all content moderators worldwide more or less the same salary instead of exploiting Global South countries for cheap labor and lax labor laws.

Fourthly, social media and content moderation companies should stop preaching about mental health if they are not going to prioritize it within their own organizations, even if they rely on outsourced labor. Treating employees like they are disposable is not what the foundation of social media should be. Making mental health a priority for content moderators can also benefit productivity.

Lastly, promoting in-house growth would increase employee motivation instead of leaving the workers as just content moderators. Offering classes and qualifications they can obtain while working for these outsourcing companies would help the company grow. Tech companies, particularly those that outsource to Global South countries, often do not care about what they provide for their employees as long as their bottom line is reached and they get what they pay the BPO to do. The exploitation of labor in countries with weaker unions and less stringent labor laws should be a primary concern for governments in nations like Kenya. These companies take advantage of the lack of worker protections and high

unemployment rates to maximize their profits at the expense of their workers' well-being. Governments must take action to investigate and address the issue of workers being forced to survive on the bare minimum salaries provided by these companies. Governments must also ensure that these companies pay their fair share of taxes. The presence of such exploitative practices in the content moderation industry is a clear indication that these jobs, in their current form, are akin to modern-day slavery. Our leaders are responsible for intervening and ensuring that workers are treated fairly, paid livable wages, and provided with the necessary protection and support.

The logo for Data Workers' Inquiry is displayed on a computer monitor. The text "Data Workers' Inquiry" is written in a clean, sans-serif font, with "Data" on the first line, "Workers'" on the second, and "Inquiry" on the third. The monitor has a thin black bezel and a small stand at the bottom.

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About the author

Botlhokwa Nondali Ditshepo Ranta is a 28-year-old woman from Johannesburg, South Africa, who grew up in a township called Diepkloof. She describes Diepkloof as “a wormhole that is hard to leave,” given the pervasiveness of precarized sex work, teenage pregnancy, and drug and alcohol abuse in this area. Botlhokwa moved to Nairobi, Kenya in 2021 to work as a content moderator at Sama. Even though her experience on the job has been sad and gloomy, she refuses to let tech giants dim her light, as she puts it.