

In Memory of Ladi Anzaki Olubunmi: A Call to Action

Thousands of data workers around the world work in extremely precarious conditions, facing financial, physical, and mental strain to make a living.

Many of them are employed by business process outsourcing centres (BPOs), which are headquartered in countries of the Global North, and operate in countries of the Global South.

Though hailed as an opportunity to tackle unemployment by way of providing digital skills, as evidenced by a recent initiative by the Kenyan “government’s plan to create 1 million jobs,” (1) Fairwork’s research to date demonstrates that these jobs do not always provide amenable working conditions (2). Workers, for example, barely make above the minimum wage, especially when their unpaid labour (e.g. overtime, reworks) is accounted for. They take on jobs that come with high job strain and secondary traumatic stress, particularly in the content moderation, whereby workers review content posted on various kinds of platforms – from e-commerce sites to social media – to ensure that it does not violate platform guidelines. This work, particularly in the case of social media moderation, can be incredibly traumatic, with workers required to watch all manner of horrors from the excessively violent to the overtly pornographic content, and their employers often lack the necessary measures to mitigate such work-related risks. Many are employed without basic employment benefits, even in instances where they are provided with employment contracts. These contracts do not always afford them sick leave, paid time off, let alone meaningful provisions to the health care costs. And in instances when they do, data workers often cannot afford to take days off without the fear of losing their jobs. Some even work overtime without pay when asked to do so by their superiors, with the hopes that their hard labour would suffice to keep their jobs. Yet, there is no certainty in that, as they work on fixed term contracts which are tied to the projects they work in—meaning, when the project is over, or abruptly terminated by the clients, they may be let go off, or, at best, put on the bench. The companies they work for may have policies in place to prevent such unfair practices—however, these policies are not always put into practice. And when workers demand greater accountability from companies, they are either left alone in their fight due to a lack of a collective bargaining unit to defend their rights, or are fired, one by one, or en masse.

BPOs are only one node in the production network. Operating with a competitive market, they are under pressure to deliver high output on tight timelines, or else risk losing contracts with lead firms. This downward pressure contributes to the challenges outlined above.

Last week, we were struck by the tragic death of Ladi Anzaki Olubunmi. Olubunmi was a content moderator at Teleperformance Kenya, providing services for TikTok. Her death has led to an outpouring of grief within the data work community, bringing together activists from key institutions such as the Siasa Place, African Content Moderator Union, Techworker Community Africa, and Data Labelers Association, among others.

Local and international media reports suggest that Olubunmi, a Nigerian national, recently requested a ticket to visit to her home country. This was a right she was entitled to as per her contract. When she made this request to the management, what she received was laughter by her superiors. She was denied the request and was left in tears. Teleperformance management knew that she wouldn't be able to leave Kenya for she did not have a work permit (3).

The little we know of Olubunmi's tenure at Teleperformance already highlights many wrongdoings. Lack of job security, denial for leave requests, bullying, employment without a work permit. No worker should face such conditions to make a living.

Olubunmi's death is a terrible demonstration of the challenges that data workers sat behind algorithmic and automated systems face, as they power the products and systems that society has come to rely on for sociality and productivity gains.

Olubunmi's death, however, is not a mere reminder that these wrongdoings exist within data work. Rather, it should serve as a call to action to ensure that they are not repeated. Without the necessary checks in place, companies will continue to exploit workers. It is therefore our responsibility, as academics, activists, lawyers, politicians, or lay citizens, to demand companies to take steps to improve working conditions.

The name, Ladi Anzaki Olubunmi, is a reminder to take action. What that means for us, as researchers at Fairwork, is to continue to use academic research to bring companies to the table and to push them into taking meaningful steps towards improving working conditions.

In solidarity,

Fairwork

Endnotes

1. "Government's Plan to Create 1 Million Jobs," Republic of Kenya <https://www.president.go.ke/governments-plan-to-create-1-million-jobs/>
2. "Fairwork AI Ratings 2023: The Workers Behind AI at Sama." https://fair.work/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2023/12/Fairwork-AI-Ratings-2023_final.pdf
3. See, among others, "Nigerian TikTok employee found dead in Kenyan apartment." The Guardian Nigeria. 11 March 2025. <https://guardian.ng/news/nigerian-tiktok-employee-found-dead-in-kenyan-apartment/>. "Kenya-based content moderators mourn Nigerian colleague who 'was desperate to go home.'" Washington Post. 12 March 2025. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/11/kenya-content-moderators-facebook-tiktok/9cd734e2-fea2-11ef-b7a7-d938159de2bc_story.html