

## Ex-VP sues Bayer, saying she defended a pregnant colleague and got whacked for it | FiercePharma

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A former VP's lawsuit claims Bayer retaliated when she defended a colleague pulled from a big project "solely because she intended to take her legally protected maternity leave."

Previously Bayer's "Working Mother of the Year," former vice president Irene Laurora has sued the Big Pharma, alleging she was mistreated after she stood up for a pregnant colleague.

Laurora's lawsuit claims that Bayer retaliated when she defended a colleague pulled from an important project "solely because she intended to take her legally protected maternity leave." After Laurora called that treatment "inappropriate" and "disrespectful" to her supervisor, the suit says, the VP faced "increasing retaliation for her brave decision, culminating with the termination of her employment."

The suit accuses Bayer of wrongful employment practices, citing New Jersey antidiscrimination laws and the federal Family and Medical Leave Act. It's not the first time Bayer has been sued for gender discrimination; it faced claims from five women in a suit filed in 2011.

The allegations are typical of wrongful termination suits: Laurora says her supervisor issued "baseless performance critiques" and that her position was phased out in a corporate reorg that didn't exist.

Bayer representatives said in a statement the company has "express policies against discrimination, harassment, and retaliation of all kinds." It's in the process of reviewing the complaint.

The company "will vigorously defend itself in this action but, as the matter is before the court, it would be inappropriate to comment further at this time," according to a spokesperson.

Filed in U.S. District Court in New Jersey, the lawsuit seeks damages, plus declaratory, injunctive and equitable relief.

Laurora's suit argues that when she applied for a new role within the company, her supervisor said, "You don't have it. I can't put my finger on it but you just don't have what I'm looking for." An HR representative at Bayer later apologized and Laurora was offered a job that was essentially a demotion, the suit says. When she declined, her employment was terminated.

Throughout her career, Laurora has "demonstrated an unparalleled passion and dedication to the plight of working mothers," according to the lawsuit, and she once had a promising future at the German pharma company.

Represented by employment law firm Wigdor LLP, she argues in the suit that many mothers-to-be are "mommy tracked" in a corporate setting "due to outdated concepts questioning the ability and dedication of expectant mothers."

She was included in Bayer's Management Excellence program and was considered for other leadership awards. According to her LinkedIn profile, Laurora most recently served as VP of innovation in R&D at Bayer Healthcare. The lawsuit cites a position as VP and category leader in analgesics, cough, cold and foot care. She has more than 20 years experience in the pharma industry.

Bayer's previous discrimination fight centered on five female employees who alleged gender and

pregnancy discrimination. It's far from the only drugmaker to face such claims, either. Novartis [settled](#) last year for \$110 million with former employees of its Alcon unit who said the company fostered a “boy’s club” atmosphere. Before that, Novartis settled a separate case for \$175 million in 2010. Among other companies to face such claims are [Daiichi Sankyo](#) and Merck & Co.

The Merck [case](#) picked up this steam this summer as 400 women joined in to argue that the company underpaid female sales reps.

*Editor's note: This story was updated with additional information from the lawsuit.*