

More women tell Uber #TimesUp in lawsuit alleging sexual assault

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In a lawsuit filed in November, two women accused Uber of not doing enough to protect female passengers from rape, sexual assault and gender-motivated harassment at the hands of its drivers. Now that lawsuit has been upped a notch.

Seven more women have joined the suit, according to an amended complaint filed Thursday. Lawyers representing the women have additionally criticized the ride-hailing company for seeking to force the women into confidential arbitration, in which hearings for the case would all happen behind closed doors.

"Uber's goal is to stop women from getting the justice they deserve through our court system," Jeanne M. Christensen, a partner at law firm Wigdor LLP who's representing the women, said in an email. "The confidential process, and inevitable NDAs when completed, further silences other female victims who may have reported similar crimes by Uber drivers had they known about the stories from victims like Jane Does one through nine."

If the case ends up in confidential arbitration, the women named in the suit will still be free to speak to the public about the case. However, the day-to-day proceedings will be off limits.

"The allegations brought forth in this case are important to us and we take them very seriously," said an Uber spokesman. "Arbitration is the appropriate venue for this case because it allows the plaintiffs to publicly speak out as much as they want and have control over their individual privacy at the same time."

Uber, valued at around \$70 billion, is one of the largest ride-hailing services on the planet, operating in nearly 80 countries. But with its growth, the company has come under fire for numerous allegations of drivers committing sexual assaults.

A handful of states, including California, Massachusetts and Texas, have previously launched investigations into Uber, claiming it routinely fails to adequately screen drivers and has hired drivers with criminal histories. Reports of alleged sexual assaults by Uber drivers make news headlines several times a month.

At least three lawsuits have been filed against the company for these allegations, including a separate complaint brought by Wigdor LLP on behalf of two other "Jane Does" in 2015. Uber settled that suit in November 2016. Another lawsuit was brought in 2015 by a woman who was raped by an Uber driver in India. Uber also settled that suit, but the issue was reignited last year after it was alleged that Uber executives obtained and mishandled her medical records.

This new lawsuit against Uber was filed in California's US District Court for the Northern District. The nine women say their Uber drivers assaulted them in separate incidents, according to court documents. The alleged assaults took place across the US, including in Pennsylvania, Florida, California, Michigan, New York, New Jersey and Iowa.

Uber and alleged sexual assaults

Many of the alleged incidents involved young women who were intoxicated, hailed an Uber and then fell asleep in the backseat of the car. For example, one woman, who lives in Los Angeles, alleges an Uber driver assaulted her while she was asleep in his car and then took her home and raped her, according to court documents. All of the women are remaining anonymous, for now.

Lawyers for the women say Uber's background checks are inadequate and the company has misrepresented how safe the service actually is. The lawsuit is asking the court to force Uber to change the way it screens drivers and be more transparent about what it knows in regard to alleged sexual assaults by drivers. The lawyers are also seeking class action status for the suit.

"In this watershed moment following the emergence of the #MeToo movement and the collective realization about the level of violence women experience, Uber had a meaningful opportunity to rise to the occasion when this action was filed," reads the amended complaint. "By doing nothing, Uber has made a choice. Uber has decided that women are second-class citizens."