

Ernst & Young faces sexual harassment complaint

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April 18, 2018

Ernst & Young is facing a sexual harassment complaint from one of its partners, claiming the world's third largest accounting firm failed to respond adequately to misconduct allegedly witnessed by other senior people at the firm.

Jessica Casucci, an Ernst & Young partner since 2014, claimed multiple senior colleagues had witnessed a male partner lift her up and sexually harass her at a conference in Orlando, but did nothing to stop him.

"In this day and age, when a woman shows the courage to stand up and complain about physical sexual harassment at work, one would expect her complaint to be treated with the utmost care and urgency," her attorney, Michael Willemin, said.

"Sadly, Ernst & Young, the third largest accounting firm in the world, did not treat Ms Casucci's complaint this way, and her career was seriously damaged as a result."

Her complaint to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in New York is the latest to highlight misconduct allegations against powerful men across many industries, driven in part by the #MeToo movement out of Hollywood. Many young women in finance say they are often demeaned, objectified and discriminated against because of their gender, despite advances in workplace equality.

Ms Casucci, a graduate from New York University's School of Law, said in her complaint that she was subject to harassment by multiple partners at the firm in addition to the unwanted advances in Florida by a tax partner in 2015.

According to the complaint filed on April 18 to the EEOC, there was little to nothing done to discipline the tax partner.

However, a spokesman from Ernst & Young said "new information" had been brought to the firm's attention on April 13 and the tax partner accused of misconduct had been placed on administrative leave while the firm investigates.

"We take all allegations of sexual harassment seriously. Once we conclude our investigation, strong disciplinary actions will be taken against anyone we determine to have violated our policies and/or our Code of Conduct."

Ms Casucci said her career suffered after the incident, because she sought to distance herself from the partner by turning down projects and had to "completely reinvent her career".

In addition to the events at the Orlando conference, she alleged that another partner repeatedly asked her sexually inappropriate questions before a speaking engagement, while another employee regularly stared at and commented on women's appearances, including Ms Casucci.

In late 2017, when the #MeToo movement was growing, Ernst & Young sent out emails touting its "zero tolerance" policy towards sexual harassment in the workplace, according to the complaint. "Ms Casucci knew, of course, that this was completely untrue," the complaint says.

In March, a senior Ernst & Young partner in Australia left the firm after allegations of sexual harassment. According to a report in the Australian Financial Review, Tony Johnson, the firm's Oceania managing partner and chief executive, said at the time that he expects "an even higher standard of behaviour from our partners, given they are the owners and senior leaders of the firm".