

Avon Hit with Class-Action Lawsuit Over Allegations of Pregnancy Discrimination

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November 14, 2018

A class-action lawsuit was recently filed on behalf of two former Avon employees over allegations that the popular beauty company “practiced systematic discrimination against women based on pregnancy, maternity, and the rights of nursing mothers to pump breast milk at work.” The suit itself was filed by Wigdor LLP, a New York law firm in the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York and takes specific aim at Avon’s branding, including its claim that it’s a “company for women.”

According to the suit, the beauty company “distinguishes itself from mainstream companies based on its ‘passionate commitment’ to empowering women, and that because of this branding, women spend millions on Avon products.” The suit also states:

“Because of this branding, women apply to work at Avon, believing that the company will empower them to succeed and provide women opportunities for advancement.”

While commenting on the suit, Jeanne M. Christensen of Wigdor LLP said:

“In the complaint we filed today on behalf of our clients, individually and on behalf of a proposed U.S. class of pregnant employees and a New York class of women that were discriminated against because they needed to pump breast milk during work hours, Avon must account for why the company ‘for women’ allows such discrimination to occur and why the male leaders of Avon insist on silencing women through the use of forced arbitration to handle complaints rather than the transparent court system.”

But what happened, exactly? Well, the law firm filed the suit on behalf of Olivera Krstanoska and Caroline Ruiz, along with other “similarly situated female employees” who experienced pregnancy and gender discrimination by Avon. According to the suit, Ruiz, who began working for Avon in January 2018, “was made aware of alleged performance issues on Feb. 2, only one day after she informed Avon of her pregnancy.”

Ruiz was also informed by her medical team that her pregnancy was considered high-risk and that she would require bed rest to help avoid a miscarriage. Because of this, she “she requested to work from home—something the suit alleges was commonplace at Avon.” However, her boss denied her request. Because of that, she ignored her doctor’s orders for bed rest and “went into the office, only to be terminated due to performance deficiencies.” As a result, the suit states:

“Avon intentionally and recklessly placed [Ruiz’s] health and pregnancy in jeopardy by compelling her to travel to the Manhattan office on February 5, 2018, just to be terminated.”

Krstanoska, on the other hand, was “subject to discriminatory hostile working conditions and an unsafe work environment after she disclosed that she was pregnant.” She joined the company in 2014 as a microbiologist, a position that exposed her to chemicals that “posed a risk for pregnant women and that could impact detrimentally the healthy development of the fetus.”

According to the suit, both Avon Products and New Avon are named as defendants. New Avon is the company’s North American business and is “controlled by the private equity firm Cerberus Capital Management.” Despite being two separate entities, the company “continues to brand itself collectively as ‘Avon.’”

In response to the allegations of discrimination detailed in the suit, an Avon spokesperson issued the following emailed statement:

“The Company strongly denies claims of discrimination. It is company policy to not comment on pending litigation. We are very proud of our reputation as ‘the company for women’ and our strong and ongoing commitment to empowering women since our founding over 130 years ago...As a preeminent employer of women, with a workforce comprised of more than two-thirds women, we understand the particular needs working mothers have, and we are committed to supporting them before, during, and after maternity leave. Our dedication to women’s advancement in the workplace includes ensuring work-life balance, a comprehensive benefits package that provides incremental women’s health features, a generous maternity leave, and well-equipped mother’s rooms”