

Fox News and hosts sued in sexual harassment suit

 [politico.com/news/2020/07/20/fox-news-sexual-assault-lawsuit-373674](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/20/fox-news-sexual-assault-lawsuit-373674)

Two women accused male Fox News hosts of sexual harassment and, in one woman's case, rape, in a [lawsuit](#) filed on Monday in federal court in New York.

Ed Henry, who was fired as a host earlier this month, was accused of sexual harassment and rape in the suit, while hosts Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson and Howard Kurtz were alleged to have separately behaved in a sexually inappropriate way. Jennifer Eckhart, a former producer, accused Henry of rape and threatening retaliation for refusing his advances. Cathy Areu, a reporter often invited on the network, accused Henry, Hannity, Carlson and Kurtz of sexual harassment and gender discrimination.

The suit alleges Henry groomed and coerced Eckhart into a violent sexual relationship where Henry physically restrained and raped Eckhart when she refused his advances. The suit includes text messages reportedly from Henry to Eckhart verbally demeaning her and demanding sex. The suit also alleges Henry took explicit photos of Eckhart without her consent and used them to taunt her.

Eckhart was 24 — about half of Henry's age — at the time, and the suit accuses Henry of using his seniority to manipulate Eckhart into a sexual relationship.

Fox News revealed July 1 that it had fired Henry after receiving a complaint against him a week earlier of “willful sexual misconduct.” The internal memo announcing his ouster did not detail the nature of his removal but said the network “strictly prohibits all forms of sexual harassment, misconduct and discrimination.”

But the lawsuit argues that those claims are specious at best. It said that Eckhart informed Fox News of the alleged rape on June 25 and that her lawyers described in detail her allegation of rape, including graphic text messages from Henry.

Fox News had also been aware of Henry's predatory behavior since at least 2017, the suit claims, when the network conducted a company-wide investigation into sexual harassment. Though multiple women came forward to complain about Henry, the network suspended him only briefly before offering him a co-anchor position on the “America's Newsroom” program, the suit said. Eckhart accused the network of violating sex trafficking laws by allowing Henry's alleged predatory behavior.

Areu also accused Henry of sexually inappropriate behavior, including sending her sexually graphic photos and pressuring her to have sex with him for professional favors. When she made it clear there would be no sex involved in their relationship, Henry called her “boring” and ended their professional relationship, the lawsuit said.

Areu has never been employed by Fox News, though the lawsuit said Henry was aware she was looking for full-time employment at the network.

After his firing on July 1, Henry tweeted a statement from his lawyer that said: “Ed Henry denies the allegations referenced in the Fox announcement and is confident that he will be vindicated after a full hearing in an appropriate forum.”

Areu also accused Hannity and Carlson of professional retaliation for refusing misogynistic behavior. Hannity offered \$100 for a member of staff to go on a date with her, which she described as a humiliating incident, and she was hardly ever invited back on his show after she refused to play along, the suit said. Areu said Carlson implicitly invited her back to his hotel room for sex in 2018 and refused to have her on his show after she turned down his advances. Areu also accused Kurtz and Fox News analyst Gianni Caldwell in her suit of conditioning professional developmental opportunities on sexual or romantic favors.

Fox News denied the allegations against its hosts in a statement:

“Based on the findings of a comprehensive independent investigation conducted by an outside law firm, including interviews with numerous eyewitnesses, we have determined that all of Cathy Areu’s claims against FOX News, including its management as well as its hosts Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity & Howard Kurtz and its contributor Gianni Caldwell, are false, patently frivolous and utterly devoid of any merit.

“We take all claims of harassment, misconduct and retaliation seriously, promptly investigating them and taking immediate action as needed — in this case, the appropriate action based on our investigation is to defend vigorously against these baseless allegations. Ms. Areu and Jennifer Eckhart can pursue their claims against Ed Henry directly with him, as FOX News already took swift action as soon as it learned of Ms. Eckhart’s claims on June 25 and Mr. Henry is no longer employed by the network.”

The episodes described in the lawsuit follow a string of accusations against key figures at Fox News involving sexual harassment and other improprieties. Fox News CEO and Chairman Roger Ailes stepped down from his post in 2016 after allegations of sexual misconduct. Ailes died in 2017. Host Bill O'Reilly was pushed from the network in 2017 after a New York Times investigation revealed he had paid several women settlements over complaints of sexual harassment.

“It is widely documented in the public record that Fox News has not only cultivated and fostered sexual harassment and misconduct, but has consistently accepted and rewarded it,” the Monday suit said. “Nevertheless, Fox News would have the public believe that it is a different place from the Fox News that was run by former disgraced Chairman and CEO Roger Ailes. Unfortunately, it is actually worse.”

