

# A Former TMZ Employee Said She Was Fired After Complaining About A Sexist, Toxic Work Environment

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A former TMZ employee filed a lawsuit against the celebrity gossip show's parent companies Warner Bros. Entertainment and EHM Productions on Tuesday alleging gender discrimination and retaliation.

Bernadette Zilio, 27, worked at TMZ and TooFab, another entertainment site owned by Warner Bros. and EHM Productions, from 2015 to 2020 and said she was fired after she complained to HR about a culture of toxicity and sexism. TMZ founder Harvey Levin, TooFab Managing Editor Shyam Dodge, and TooFab Senior Producer Ross McDonagh are also named in the lawsuit.

In the complaint, which was filed Tuesday with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, Zilio said she went to Warner Bros. HR representatives in April 2019 about issues of “sexism, belittlement, preferential treatment and lies running rampant on [her] team.” She told HR that she felt there was a division of how men and women were treated on her team, and that when she spoke up about McDonagh writing articles she considered sexist and offensive, such as one that compared Rihanna getting sick with bronchitis and the “attack on her lungs” to her being attacked by Chris Brown, her concerns about making light of domestic violence were dismissed.

The complaint also says that Zilio and her female colleagues described the work environment as “a boys’ club,” “100% a bro fest,” and a “freaking frat house.”

“The first time I went to HR, they launched an investigation,” Zilio told BuzzFeed News. “Nothing is ever concrete, nothing is ever written down. I never get emails following up with anything... they tell you we have a no-retaliation policy. The investigation concludes, nothing changes, and that’s when these small forms of retaliation I feel happened.”

Two weeks later, Zilio said HR told her they did not find any evidence of gender bias in their investigation based on her complaint. That’s when Zilio said she started to feel retaliated against for reporting her concerns.

Zilio said that TMZ General Manager Stuart Alpert pulled her into a meeting and said, “Shyam [Dodge] is your boss. You listen to him and function as one, or you leave.” Levin also allegedly called Zilio into a conference room for a private meeting after the HR investigation.

“He laid out that whatever I had an issue with, whatever problems I had internally within

the team with management, it didn't matter," Zilio said. "My job was to report to Shyam [Dodge] and Shyam was the man that Harvey hired, and therefore that is the chain of command and I'm supposed to do what I'm told. It really wasn't a conversation, there was no opportunity for me to say anything and so I walked out of that meeting in tears."

Zilio said she was also reprimanded for making mistakes at work that her male colleagues were not criticized for.

In January 2020, Zilio contacted another Warner Bros. HR representative to say that she didn't believe anything had been done to fix the sexist work environment she had complained about in 2019. She then spoke with Warner Bros. Employee Relations representatives in February about how she thought the male and female staffers were treated differently and described what she called a sexist environment, even though she said she was nervous about being retaliated against for continuing to go to HR.

Zilio was eventually fired and, according to the complaint, her separation agreement, which she declined to sign, was dated Feb. 26, 2020, one day after her final HR meeting about her allegations of a toxic and sexist work culture.

"By the time I reached out to HR for the second time in January 2020, I specifically said, 'I am petrified to be speaking to you right now because my life was made hell after the last time I went to an HR representative,'" Zilio said. "She again reiterated, 'We have a no-retaliation policy. Whatever problems you have, we don't discriminate here, I'm here to help you.' And that's the same woman who walked me out the front door on my last day."

In a statement, a spokesperson for TMZ and TooFab said the company "parted ways" with Zilio after "incidents of plagiarism and inaccurate reporting."

"This is a blatant attempt to use negative publicity and inaccurate claims to force TooFab and TMZ to pay a monetary settlement," the spokesperson added. "We will vigorously defend against any attempt to mischaracterize what is a legal and justified employment decision."

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Bryan Arbeit, a lawyer representing Zilio, told BuzzFeed News in a statement that "this environment has been allowed to persist and certainly Warner Bros. is aware of what happens in the past and what continues to happen."

He added that any claim of work performance-related issues are "belied by the fact that Ms. Zilio worked for the company for five years and received a significant raise just before her complaint of discrimination, and she was fired directly thereafter."

“We are asking the EEOC to do a full investigation into the toxic environment that Warner Brothers and its subsidiaries have condoned for too many years,” Arbeit said. “We hope other women who have experienced similar discrimination and retaliation as Ms. Zilio will speak out to help change how women are treated in the entertainment industry.”

Zilio said she’s “still terrified” to openly discuss her experience at TMZ and TooFab despite the fact that she doesn’t work there anymore, but her goal is to improve working conditions for current employees there.

“I’m scared, but at the same time, this is bigger than just me getting fired. I feel like it’s time for people to be held accountable,” Zilio said. “I want the culture to change. I don’t want anyone to leave that office and cry and feel like they’re worthless. I don’t think that’s healthy or normal.”

Beyond seeing a shift in the work environment at TMZ, TooFab, and Warner Bros., Zilio said she also hopes the entire entertainment industry makes concrete changes to ensure that women feel safe going to HR when they’re working in a toxic and sexist environment.

“It should be truly, truly taken into account when a woman goes to HR and says, ‘I don’t feel comfortable with this,’ or ‘I have a problem with that,’ and I think there need to be steps taken to have a more concrete HR investigation process,” she said. “Because right now, I think people just twiddle their thumbs and come back and tell you nothing is wrong. I think there should be paper trails, more involvement with the actual employee, and more testimony from other people.”