

Deutsche Bank VP Sues for Being 'Mommy-Tracked'



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A Deutsche Bank vice president is suing her employer for gender discrimination and retaliation related to her pregnancy, saying she was "mommy-tracked" for taking maternity leave.

Kelly Voelker, in her mid-40s, has been a vice president at the bank for 13 years, a tenure her lawyer says is "unheard of." She was recommended for a promotion within a few years after joining the company in November 1998 as a vice president with the bank's securities lending desk. But that recommendation was rejected despite consistently having the highest score in her performance reviews.

While Voelker sought a promotion for years, she said Deutsche Bank instead eventually demoted her, one of its few female vice presidents, solely because of her gender and recent childbirth.

In a statement, a Deutsche Bank spokeswoman said "we take these allegations very seriously and decline to comment further at this point."

Voelker said the bank externally hired equally-qualified male candidates while her workplace had a "hostile and degrading" atmosphere towards women. The suit claims one of her managers frequently used vulgar sexual language and was aware a male director took clients to strip clubs.

When Voelker was about to go on maternity leave in 2003 with her first child, she said one superior "expressed his doubts" she would return to the company. The suit claims her supervisors, "never took her seriously because she was a woman starting a family, and this was seen as a huge negative within the company."

Voelker's attorney, Douglas Wigdor, said the tenure of a vice president at an investment bank is typically three to five years before being promoted to a director. Wigdor said all eight directors in the bank's securities lending division are male.

"The amazing fact in this case is that she was hired as a VP almost 13 years ago and she's still a VP despite the fact she is very highly qualified," Wigdor said. His firm, Thompson Wigdor, represents [Nafissatou Diallo](#), the hotel maid who accused former IMF chief [Dominique Strauss-Kahn](#) of attempted rape in a civil lawsuit. His firm also represented a gender class action suit against German bank Dresdner which led to a settlement.

Maternity-related lawsuits are not new to the financial world. In August, a New York district court judge dismissed a [class-action suit against Bloomberg L.P.](#) that claimed it discriminated against pregnant mothers and those returning from leave.

"[Voelker] has outperformed her male peers and had to put up with continued gender-based derogatory remarks and retaliation for having taken maternity leave," Wigdor said.

In late 2009, when she announced her need to go on maternity leave with her last child, the suit claims "her exemplary performance was further ignored and her male colleagues ensured her alienation through their actions on and around the trading desk."

When Voelker questioned a decision made by one of her superiors in fall 2009, another executive said, "I'd watch your step - she's pregnant," the suit claims. In response, her supervisor replied, "No need to tell me. I've got one at home," referring to his pregnant wife.

The suit details instances in which her superiors handed assignments to a newly hired male peer, despite her successful completion of projects, before she went on maternity leave in December 2009.

When she returned in May 2010 to a "chilling welcome," according to the suit, a superior in the company "immediately" tried to persuade her to take on a more "flexible" reduced role, a request echoed by "various members of Deutsche Bank management."

Voelker voiced "strong objections" to the idea and reiterated her desire to become a director. But she said the company retaliated against her by promoting her male peer who continued to cover her arbitrage accounts, "greatly reducing her ability to attain high-revenue figures" for the desk.

The suit details other complaints, including a smaller bonus compared with those given to her male peers, reduced duties to a "vague and undefined marketing role" with "no clear career trajectory and absolutely zero visibility."

Voelker said her employer retracted its demotion and "retroactively claimed" she had the option to stay in her previous role after her attorney sent the bank a letter.

She is suing Deutsche Bank for unlawful and discriminatory conduct in violation of the Equal Pay Act and seeking an award of monetary damages and attorneys' fees. As an eligible employee under the Family and Medical Leave Act and the bank's maternity leave policy, she said she was entitled to 16 weeks of protected leave, without having her role at-risk upon her return.

The suit claims the bank's "unlawful and discriminatory actions constitute malicious, willful and wanton violations" of the New York City Human Rights Law.