

A former vice-president who had been Bayer Corp.'s 'Working Mother of the Year' filed a discrimination lawsuit against the company, claiming she was fired after standing up for a pregnant co-worker who was treated unfairly.

In a suit filed on Wednesday, Irene Laurora claims she won the company's award in 2012 for her work on behalf of Bayer's Women's Leadership Initiative and her advocacy for parents of special needs children. But Bayer retaliated against her last year after she placed a pregnant woman she supervised in charge of a long-term project, she said.

One of Laurora's bosses then assigned the project to a man and took it away from the pregnant woman "solely because she intended to take her legally protected maternity leave", according to the complaint in federal court in Newark, New Jersey.

The lawsuit follows a similar complaint filed in 2011 by women who said they were subject to discrimination and retaliation. After extensive litigation, 10 women agreed last year to dismiss the case, according to court records.

Bayer spokesman Christopher Loder said the company is reviewing the complaint and will "vigorously defend itself".

"The company has express policies against discrimination, harassment and retaliation of all kinds," Loder said in a statement.

Laurora, who began work for the drugmaker in New Jersey in 2007, said she protested the reassignment was "inappropriate and disrespectful", prompting her boss to say she shouldn't have complained. In retaliation, she claims, her boss gave her a worse performance review, her position was eliminated in a reorganisation, and she wasn't considered for another job before she was fired.

When she asked repeatedly why she wasn't considered for the other job, her boss said, "You don't have it. I can't put my finger on it but you just don't have what I'm looking for," according to the complaint.

Laurora, 51, was a vice-president and category leader for analgesic, cough, cold and foot care, according to the complaint. Laurora, who has a Ph.D in clinical pharmacology, left the company on September 30, according to her attorney, Douglas Wigdor.

She sued under the federal Family Medical Leave Act and the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination. Her complaint seeks unspecified compensatory and punitive damages.

"When supervisors speak out on behalf of people they're supervising, they should be free from reprisal," Wigdor said. "Unfortunately, Bayer has sent a clear message that supervisors should turn a blind eye to acts of discrimination."