

Five NY1 Anchorwomen Sue Cable Channel for Age and Gender Discrimination

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Five anchorwomen at NY1, one of the country's most prominent local news channels, sued the network on Wednesday over age and gender discrimination, alleging a systematic effort by managers to force them off the air in favor of younger, less experienced hosts.

The suit, filed in Federal District Court in Manhattan, portrays a newsroom at odds with the friendly image that has made NY1 a beloved institution among New Yorkers. And it publicized tensions that have long afflicted the TV news business, where older women's careers often fade as male counterparts thrive.

The plaintiffs range in age from 40 to 61 and include Roma Torre, one of the channel's longest-serving anchors. "We feel we are being railroaded out of the place," Ms. Torre said in an interview. "Men age on TV with a sense of gravitas, and we as women have an expiration date."

Ms. Torre, 61, and her co-plaintiffs — Amanda Farinacci, Vivian Lee, Jeanine Ramirez and Kristen Shaughnessy — said the leadership team installed by Charter Communications, the cable giant that acquired NY1 in 2016, reduced their airtime and anchoring slots, excluded them from promotional campaigns and consistently ignored their concerns.

“At some point, we were branded malcontents and told to stop complaining,” said Ms. Torre, who joined the network at its inception in 1992.

A Charter spokeswoman, Maureen Huff, said on Wednesday that more than half of NY1’s on-air talent is female, and that more than half is over 40.

“We take these allegations seriously and as we complete our thorough review, we have not found any merit to them,” Ms. Huff said in a statement. “NY1 is a respectful and fair workplace and we’re committed to providing a work environment in which all our employees are valued and empowered.”

Charter, which is based in Stamford, Conn., has retained the law firm Proskauer Rose to defend against the suit.

The first 24-hour local news station, NY1 built a low-fi look and familiar anchor lineup that was part of its town-square charm. Its blue-and-white logo has become a city signifier, making cameos in Manhattan-centric entertainment like “Law & Order: SVU” and “The Amazing Spider-Man 2.”

When Charter purchased Time Warner Cable, NY1’s parent company, it laid off about a dozen of the network’s longtime anchors, men and women. The new owner also invested in modernizing the newscast, building a new set for the popular “Mornings on 1” and updating the graphics that had barely changed since David N. Dinkins was mayor.

The lawsuit filed on Wednesday claims that the revamp extended to sweeping out older women among the on-air talent.

For Vivian Lee, 44, who joined as an anchor in 2008, NY1 stood apart from other local channels in emphasizing substance over glitz.

“They weren’t the big networks,” she said in an interview. “They’re stating the value they place on experience and community-driven news.”

She added: “Until Charter came in, that feeling was there.” The lawsuit alleges that after Ms. Lee’s weekly show, “Spotlight,” was canceled in January, managers demoted her and reduced her opportunities to fill in for weekday anchors.

“I’m faced with the feeling of what it’s like to be edged out,” Ms. Lee said. “It’s really heartbreaking.”

Ms. Torre is a familiar face to NY1 viewers, but she said her on-air presence had been steadily eroded since Charter took over. Once entrusted with three hours of solo anchoring time on weekdays, Ms. Torre says she now has one hour; some of her co-anchoring time was cut, too. And her theater reviews no longer appear on the weekly Broadway roundup, "On Stage," she added.

The lawsuit also includes Ms. Torre's frustration with NY1's favorable treatment of Pat Kiernan, its star morning anchor.

Ms. Torre's salary is "less than half that of Mr. Kiernan," the suit alleges. It also says that Ms. Torre was barred from using the makeup artists provided for Mr. Kiernan's show, and that when she asked to use his revamped studio, a manager told her to "stop complaining."

When Mr. Kiernan celebrated 20 years at the network, NY1 promoted the anniversary with an ad campaign, on-air segments and promotional food trucks. "Ms. Torre, by contrast, with a longer tenure and celebrating 25 years on air with her own daily live show, received no special promotion whatsoever," the suit says.

When Ms. Torre received a local Emmy Award in May, the official NY1 Twitter account posted a photograph of her accepting the prize — with Mr. Kiernan featured in the foreground, snapping his own picture of Ms. Torre. The suit calls the tweet a "blatant" example of "NY1's favoritism toward Mr. Kiernan at Ms. Torre's expense." (When a user on Twitter asked why the network "couldn't let Roma have her moment," Mr. Kiernan replied: "I'm so sorry you interpreted this like that. I was just trying to get the shot.")

Ms. Torre and her fellow anchors are represented by Douglas Wigdor, a prominent Manhattan employment lawyer who represented the hotel maid in the sexual assault case against the former International Monetary Fund leader Dominique Strauss-Kahn. He has sued major corporations, including Starbucks and Citigroup, and filed multiple discrimination suits against Fox News. (Mr. Wigdor's firm also represents clients in a racial discrimination suit against The New York Times.)

"Our five clients have clearly been told that their careers are over, as NY1 seems to believe that younger faces, when it comes to women, are a 'better look' for the bottom line," Mr. Wigdor said in a statement.

During a meeting at Mr. Wigdor's law office, the five anchors nodded in recognition as each described her experience as a woman in the competitive TV news business, including what they called an easier road for male colleagues.

"It fits the rhetoric of 'These whiny old ladies are complaining again,'" said Amanda Farinacci, 40, the network's Staten Island reporter. "But this is career-ending, these opportunities that we're not getting." Among other slights, the lawsuit alleges that Ms. Farinacci was excluded from moderating a town hall based on her reporting on Hurricane Sandy.

Like her colleagues, Ms. Farinacci invoked the case of Sue Simmons, the WNBC-TV anchor whose ouster in 2012 caused an uproar. Her co-anchor, Chuck Scarborough, remained at the network, where he recently celebrated his 45th year.

"It's always there as a woman," Ms. Farinacci said. "How much longer do I have? Where am I going? Look at Chuck, he's been there 45 years. And people just disappear, like Sue."

Age discrimination cases can sometimes be difficult to establish at trial, and lawyers who specialize in labor issues say some industries accept a certain amount of ageism as a matter of course.

"In Hollywood and the media, the perceived wisdom is that there's discrimination against older employees, particularly women, because employers want to put forward a younger face," said David Lopez, a former general counsel of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the dean of Rutgers Law School. "That's discrimination, in my book."

Mr. Lopez, who had not reviewed the NY1 lawsuit and spoke in general terms, said employers were often more comfortable expressing a bias against older workers, as opposed to bias based on gender or race.

"But it is against the law," he said, "even in the media industry."

Many of Mr. Wigdor's lawsuits are settled without an explicit finding of liability. In his office this week, the NY1 anchors said they hoped that going public with their claims might ease the pathway for women in their industry.

"We don't have animosity toward the younger people who are taking our jobs," Ms. Torre said. "But they're going to get older, too, one day. And this cycle has got to stop."