

New York Lawmakers Blast 'Oppressive' Ernst & Young Over Sex-Abuse Case

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A bipartisan group of 67 New York state lawmakers on Tuesday blasted Ernst & Young in an open letter over their “oppressive” response to a sexual harassment and discrimination suit filed last year.

Karen Ward, a former partner at the company, initially filed her federal complaint in September, claiming that women face “egregious” sexual harassment and pay discrimination at the company, and that they are consistently subjected to lewd comments about their breasts and other body parts.

Ward’s supervisor at various times told her that she was “really hot,” that he loved her “great big round boobs,” and that she had a “nice ass,” according to her 21-page Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint filed at the time.

Ward alleged that it was “regular practice” for her male coworkers “to brag that they were able to situate their chairs in such a way that they were able to see a junior female employee’s vagina, or, as they disgustingly referred to it, her ‘snatch.’”

Ernst & Young has denied all of Ward’s claims, calling them “unsubstantiated,” “unfounded and baseless.”

At issue this week, as state Senators Liz Krueger and Alessandra Biaggi and Assemblymembers Aravella Simotas and Jo Anne Simon, point out, is the \$185,000 Ward has been charged just to have her claims heard in forced arbitration. According to Ward’s attorneys, had her case been heard in court, she would have only had to pay \$450 in court costs to date.

Ward and her attorney Michael Willemin last week filed a declaratory judgment seeking to invalidate her arbitration agreement with Ernst & Young, arguing that no victim of sexual harassment or discrimination should be made to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars just to have their claims heard.

“By limiting her recourse to forced arbitration at a personal cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars, you are effectively silencing her and sending a message to your other employees that their claims will not be given a fair hearing and that they will have to pay exorbitant costs to simply have their claims heard,” the letter, signed by the lawmakers, said.

Krueger et al called the case a “particularly egregious example” of such abuses created by forced arbitration agreements.

"It is disturbing that Ernst & Young is unwilling to recognize the negative impact arbitration requirements have on the ability of workers to get a fair hearing and the chilling effect these agreements can have on reporting," said the letter.

Assemblymember Simotas, in a separate statement, swiped at Ernst & Young's policy, describing it as "an oppressive relic used to put up barriers and prevent targets of harassment from coming forward."

Another former partner at Ernst & Young, Jessica Casucci, [filed a similar complaint](#) in April of last year, alleging sexual assault and harassment by a male partner. Specifically, Casucci said that her male colleagues groped her breasts and rear end in front of coworkers.

The Daily Beast [reported at the time](#) that one of Casucci's partners allegedly groped her while telling her, "I've wanted to fuck you for so long," "I know that you want to fuck me," and that the "sex would be amazing,"

Ernst & Young has emphasized, in multiple statements, that it is "committed to a workplace free of discrimination and harassment of any kind."

"Some companies still have not gotten the memo that the days of the boys' club are over," said Krueger. "It is 2019, not 1959, and it is simply unacceptable to perpetuate a culture of harassment and discrimination at work. Ernst & Young claims to be a leader on gender equity, yet their forced arbitration requirements effectively slam shut the doors on their employees' access to justice."

"They can and must do better," she added.

A request for comment on the open letter from The Daily Beast was not immediately returned by Ernst & Young on Wednesday.