

WeWork's Ousted C.E.O. Adam Neumann Is Accused of Pregnancy Discrimination

 [nytimes.com/2019/10/31/business/wework-neumann-discrimination-complaint.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/business/wework-neumann-discrimination-complaint.html)

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When the chief of staff to the WeWork co-founder Adam Neumann became pregnant in March 2016, she was reluctant to immediately share the news with her boss.

But ultimately, the employee, Medina Bardhi, felt she had no choice. She had to explain that she could no longer accompany Mr. Neumann on business trips “due to his penchant for bringing marijuana on chartered flights and smoking it throughout the flight while in an enclosed cabin,” according to a complaint she filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in New York on Thursday.

What followed, the complaint said, was a pattern of discrimination, as Ms. Bardhi was repeatedly derided and marginalized by Mr. Neumann and other WeWork officials. He referred to her maternity leave as a “vacation” or “retirement,” and another high-level company official, Jennifer Berrent, commented, “Wow, you’re getting big,” in front of a WeWork executive.

Mr. Neumann, who had promised to champion women at WeWork, stepped down as the company’s chief executive in September as its attempted initial public offering collapsed in dramatic fashion. He received a \$185 million deal to work as a consultant to the company for four years.

In recent months, other women have filed lawsuits accusing WeWork of gender discrimination. Their complaints have added to the storm of criticism WeWork and Mr. Neumann have faced from bankers, analysts and current and former employees since its attempt to go public failed. Mr. Neumann’s leadership has come under particularly intense scrutiny: He has been criticized for maintaining a lavish lifestyle and giving outsize power to family members, including his wife, Rebekah.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Neumann declined to comment, referring questions to WeWork. In a statement, a WeWork spokeswoman, Gwen Rocco, said the company “intends to vigorously defend itself against” the complaint.

“We have zero tolerance for discrimination of any kind,” Ms. Rocco said. “We are committed to moving the company forward and building a company and culture that our employees can be proud of.”

During her five years at WeWork, Ms. Bardhi became pregnant twice and was demoted both times, the complaint said. She was fired in early October, shortly after Mr. Neumann left, according to the complaint.

The complaint also said that WeWork had a broader culture of abuse and disrespect toward women — a work environment in which excessive alcohol consumption fueled “offensive sexual conduct” and women were routinely paid less than male colleagues with similar jobs.

Ms. Bardhi’s lawyer, Douglas Wigdor, said he hoped that the E.E.O.C. would view her experiences as part of a systemic problem at the company and bring class-action charges against WeWork.

The discrimination Ms. Bardhi faced began before she even started at WeWork, the complaint said. During a job interview in October 2013, Mr. Neumann “unlawfully and intrusively” asked Ms. Bardhi whether she planned to get married or become pregnant — a question that left her “stunned and uncomfortable,” according to the complaint.

When Ms. Bardhi became pregnant three years later, the complaint said, Mr. Neumann replaced her with a male employee who was paid more than twice as much.

Then, rather than restoring her to the job of chief of staff when she returned from maternity leave, the complaint said, the company gave her no clear direction on her day-to-day responsibilities.

Eventually, she got the job back, the complaint said. She became pregnant a second time in February 2018 and the cycle repeated — a male employee was hired to replace her, and she found herself sidelined when she returned to work.

“She was given no information about what her new role would be,” the complaint said. “This was obvious retaliation for her taking maternity leave and discrimination against a pregnant employee and new mother.”

Her difficulties continued during the buildup to the failed initial public offering, the complaint said. As Mr. Neumann and Ms. Bardhi drove back from the offices of JPMorgan Chase on Sept. 16, the complaint said, Mr. Neumann said to her, “I hope you enjoyed your vacation.”

Peter Eavis contributed reporting.