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# WeWork and Ex-CEO Adam Neumann Accused of Pregnancy and Gender Discrimination

Neumann's former chief of staff says she faced offensive and retaliatory behavior over both of her pregnancies, and that the company "demeaned" employees who were women.

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By [Anna Merlan](#)

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Medina Bardhi, the former chief of staff to ex-WeWork CEO Adam Neumann, says her former boss was far from supportive when she first went on maternity leave in December 2016. Neumann, Bardhi alleged in a complaint filed with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in New York on Thursday, made offensive comments from the moment she told him she was pregnant. Shortly before she went on maternity leave, Bardhi says Neumann told her, "I hope you're going to have fun on your vacation while we're all here working" and referred to it as her "retirement." She also alleges that WeWork's chief legal officer Jennifer Berrent referred to her pregnancy as a "problem" that needed "a solution" and to be "fixed." Bardhi's complaint was filed against both WeWork as a company as well as naming Neumann and Berrent individually.

Neumann stepped down as CEO in September and will reportedly receive a hefty \$1.7 billion exit deal for having done the hard work of losing a truly

ungodly amount of money.

Bardhi worked at the company for 5 ½ years, much of it for Neumann directly, per the complaint, and says she was terminated from WeWork on October 2, 2019, six months after her second pregnancy leave. Her complaint accuses the company of gender and pregnancy discrimination, saying she was demoted after both pregnancies and claims that Neumann even illegally asked her at her job interview in 2013 if she planned to marry or become pregnant. Her attorneys also claim he “routinely asked female job candidates at interviews whether and when they planned to become pregnant.” Bardhi says the question left her “stunned and uncomfortable” per the complaint, particularly since she’d worked with him for several years at Neumann’s unfortunately-named prior company, Egg Baby (which was, ironically, given the circumstances, a clothing company for infants).

Bardhi says she became pregnant for the first time in March 2016 and was forced to tell Neumann the following month, when she was obligated to accompany him on a work trip. The notification, the complaint says, was necessary “due to his penchant for bringing marijuana on chartered flights and smoking it throughout the flight while in the enclosed cabin. Ms. Bardhi obviously could not expose her unborn child to marijuana smoke, much less in such an enclosed space for hours at a time.” (Bardhi also recounts witnessing an “infamous” flight in 2015 from Mexico to New York wherein all the passengers drank “shot after shot” of tequila, and that two executives, a man and a woman, traded jabs about “eating pussy.”)

Bardhi claims that her two pregnancies caused Neumann and other high-level WeWork executives to express a “crystal-clear attitude of disfavor” towards her; she says that when she came back from work after her first pregnancy, she’d lost her Chief of Staff role, had no clear job duties and was forced to share a desk. (The complaint also claims the lactation room at her office, a legal requirement in New York City, was “inexcusably unsanitary”

and not large enough for all the breastfeeding employees at the company at the time).

Bardhi's allegations also take aim at the company's Chief Legal Officer Jennifer Berrent, the person she says called her pregnancy a "problem." Berrent, Bardhi claims, "worked repeatedly with Mr. Neumann to permanently replace" her. She also, Bardhi claims, "mocked and body-shamed" her during her second pregnancy, commenting, "Wow, you're getting big."

When she went into labor for the second time, Bardhi says her apparent replacement, Josh Greene, was moved into her office the same day. By the time she came back, she claims, a different person had been installed in the role, her office had been re-assigned, and Neumann texted her, "will talk about it when I see you." Bardhi says she was "effectively sidelined and denied meaningful work for months," before being told she'd be moved onto the team of an executive who was a woman. But that job never materialized either, she says, because that executive herself quit too, feeling sidelined and "marginalized" by her own pregnancy. (The complaint claims that executive tried to prevent losing her status by rushing back to work just six weeks after giving birth.)

Bardhi's complaint also says that her treatment goes hand-in-hand with the company's "sexually aggressive" attitude towards employees who are women, and calls it a company rife with "sexually inappropriate discussions and conduct." WeWork was sued in July for gender discrimination by a former WeWork executive named Lisa Bridges, at the same time another former executive, Richard Markel, 62, sued the company for age discrimination.

For years, the complaint claims, women at WeWork have “been subjected to a work environment in which female employees are demeaned for taking maternity leave, excessive alcohol consumption fuels offensive sexual conduct towards women, and where it is common for women to be paid less than their male colleagues in the same or similar roles (despite often being more qualified).”

Bardhi is requesting that the EEOC investigate her claims of “systematic, collective, and class-wide gender pay disparities that have been perpetrated against female WeWork employees,” and award damages to her and other similarly-situated current and former WeWork employees.

In a statement to VICE and other media outlets, Gwendolyn Rocco, a public relations representative for WeWork, said, “WeWork intends to vigorously defend itself against this claim. We have zero tolerance for discrimination of any kind. We are committed to moving the company forward and building a company and culture that our employees can be proud of.”

Bardhi is represented by Wigdor LLP; in a statement, founding partner Douglas Wigdor said:

*"It is astonishing that WeWork could reward Adam Neumann's blatant sexist behavior with a staggering and unprecedented golden parachute worth over a reported \$1 Billion, while the Company has subjected Ms. Bardhi and other women to repeated and systematic marginalization, lesser pay than their male colleagues, and retaliation for having the courage to raise legitimate complaints of gender and pregnancy discrimination. Our hope is that this class action complaint will send a loud and clear message to WeWork and other startups that pregnant women cannot be forced out of their jobs, that women must be paid fairly and afforded equal opportunities, and that you cannot retaliate against any person who voices a complaint of discrimination."*