

Two Women Sue Fox News, Claiming Misconduct by Ed Henry and Others

[nytimes.com/2020/07/20/business/media/fox-news-harassment-lawsuit-ed-henry.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/20/business/media/fox-news-harassment-lawsuit-ed-henry.html)

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Fox News fired Ed Henry, one of the network's most prominent anchors, this month after the network investigated a former employee's accusation of sexual misconduct against him.

On Monday, the former employee sued Mr. Henry and Fox News, describing a history of workplace harassment and a relationship with the anchor that she said included violent sex and rape. The woman, Jennifer Eckhart, a former associate producer at Fox Business, said that Mr. Henry had coerced her into a sexual relationship by promising to advance her career.

A co-plaintiff, Cathy Areu, a frequent guest on Fox News programs, alleged in the lawsuit that Mr. Henry had harassed her, as well, by sending sexually explicit messages. Ms. Areu also described exchanges with other Fox News stars, including the anchors Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity and Howard Kurtz, that she called inappropriate and sexually charged.

Fox News, in a statement, said that it had retained an outside law firm to investigate Ms. Areu's claims and determined them to be "false, patently frivolous and utterly devoid of any merit." Fox News issued the statement on behalf of the network as well as Mr. Carlson, Mr. Hannity and Mr. Kurtz, who were also named as defendants in the suit.

The network did not challenge Ms. Eckhart's allegations against Mr. Henry, noting: "Fox News already took swift action as soon as it learned of Ms. Eckhart's claims on June 25 and Mr. Henry is no longer employed by the network."

A lawyer for Mr. Henry, Catherine Foti, said in a statement that the lawsuit's allegations against her client were "fictional," adding: "The evidence in this case will demonstrate that Ms. Eckhart initiated and completely encouraged a consensual relationship. Ed Henry looks forward to presenting actual facts and evidence."

Fox News has said previously that it suspended Mr. Henry as soon as executives learned of Ms. Eckhart's allegations against him; the anchor was fired several days later. His dismissal was an echo of Fox News's past scandals involving workplace harassment and sexual misconduct, which prompted the exits of its founder, Roger E. Ailes, and the host Bill O'Reilly.

The lawsuit, filed on Monday in Federal District Court in Manhattan, depicts an environment where powerful male hosts regularly flirted with junior female personnel and promised career help in exchange for sexual attention.

Ms. Eckhart, who joined Fox Business in her early 20s, alleged that Mr. Henry, an established star at Fox News, “preyed upon, manipulated and groomed” her. The lawsuit, which includes cropped screenshots of sexually explicit text exchanges, describes Ms. Eckhart being coerced into a relationship with Mr. Henry in which he demanded sadomasochistic sexual favors, culminating in a “violent, painful rape” in a Manhattan hotel room in 2017.

Ms. Eckhart said in the lawsuit that she complained to a human resources executive about “a toxic work environment” in February 2020, but that the network did not follow up with her. On June 12, Ms. Eckhart was let go. She approached the network on June 25 with her claims about Mr. Henry, who was fired on July 1.

Ms. Eckhart and Ms. Areu are represented by the law firm of Douglas H. Wigdor, a prominent lawyer in workplace harassment cases who has sued Fox News on several occasions.

A partner at the firm, Michael J. Willemin, said on Monday that the law firm retained by Fox News to investigate his clients’ claims “did not even speak with either of our clients,” and he called on Fox News to release a copy of its internal investigation.

Fox News said that its investigators “requested in writing the opportunity to speak directly with each plaintiff with their attorneys present.” The network said that Mr. Wigdor’s firm would make the plaintiffs available only if the interviews “could not be used in any future litigation or proceeding,” a position that Fox News called legally “unreasonable.”

Ms. Areu, who was a frequent guest on Fox News shows but not employed by the network, said in the lawsuit that Mr. Hannity, on set in 2018, urged male members of his crew to take her on a date and referred to her as “a beautiful woman.” She said that Mr. Carlson, after she appeared on his show in 2018, told Ms. Areu that he was staying alone in a Manhattan hotel without his family. She said that Mr. Kurtz, in 2019, invited her to meet him in the lobby of his hotel and was miffed when she declined.

In all three instances, according to the lawsuit, Ms. Areu said that she suffered career repercussions and was rarely invited back to appear on the hosts’ programs. Ms. Areu also said that Gianni Caldwell, a Fox News contributor, inappropriately asked her to lunch in exchange for a meeting with the star pundit Ann Coulter.

Ms. Eckhart and Ms. Areu are seeking damages against Fox News and the defendants for sexual harassment, creating a hostile work environment, retaliation, and in the case of Ms. Eckhart and Mr. Henry, violations of laws against sex trafficking.