

SoulCycle's ex-CEO said 'paternity leave is for pussies,' a new lawsuit filed by an exec who was fired 32 days after giving birth alleges

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Isabella Jibilian and Kate Taylor 7 hours ago

- A former SoulCycle executive filed a complaint on Tuesday accusing the company of discriminating against her for being pregnant.
- In a complaint filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in New York, Jordan Kafenbaum said she was demoted after disclosing that she was pregnant and then fired 32 days after giving birth.
- The complaint also alleges that Melanie Whelan, SoulCycle's former CEO, told a senior vice president that "paternity leave is for pussies."
- A SoulCycle representative said in a statement that the company "strongly disagrees with the accusations" and "intends to vigorously defend itself."
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A SoulCycle employee who was responsible for overseeing almost 400 instructors said in a lawsuit filed on Tuesday that she was discriminated against for being pregnant. The lawsuit also describes other instances of opposition to parental leave across the company.

In [the complaint](#), filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in New York, Jordan Kafenbaum said she was fired 32 days after giving birth. Kafenbaum had worked at the company for nearly seven years, most recently as the senior director of instructor programming and talent management.

The complaint says SoulCycle executives told Kafenbaum that her position was being eliminated because of financial concerns tied to the coronavirus pandemic. It also alleges that Kafenbaum faced discrimination for being pregnant and that SoulCycle's professions of inclusivity hid deeper issues inside the company.

The complaint accuses Melanie Whelan, [who was SoulCycle's CEO until stepping down in November](#), of telling Gary Gaines, the company's senior vice president of global operations and studio experience, who had planned to take paternity leave, that "paternity leave is for pussies" in August 2019.

"News of the comment spread like fire through all levels of SoulCycle employees," the complaint says. "Such a statement is unlawful standing alone. But when said by the CEO, it speaks volumes about the culture."

Whelan did not immediately provide a comment on the lawsuit when contacted by

Business Insider.

The complaint says that SoulCycle's approach to pregnancy and parental leave influenced how Kafenbaum was treated after disclosing her pregnancy in September.

Last February, SoulCycle leadership told Kafenbaum that she would be moved to a new position, which she saw as a demotion, the complaint says. It adds that the company offered "inconsistent excuses" before the pandemic to explain why Kafenbaum would be forced into a different position following her maternity leave.

Kafenbaum gave birth on March 25. On April 27, Kafenbaum was told that SoulCycle was eliminating her position because of the financial strain of the pandemic, the complaint says. It alleges that three other women who had their positions eliminated around the same time had either recently returned from maternity leave or were pregnant.

The lawsuit follows other concerns about inclusion at SoulCycle

A SoulCycle representative said in a statement to Business Insider that the company "strongly disagrees with the accusations" and "intends to vigorously defend itself."

"SoulCycle offers paid parental leave for all full-time employees," the SoulCycle representative said. "Ms. Kafenbaum was unfortunately laid off as part of a necessary restructuring due to the impact of COVID-19. She was paid for the entirety of her maternity leave and offered severance."

The complaint was filed soon after two instructors quit because of concerns about inclusion at SoulCycle, which has described itself as having an "immersive culture of inspiration and empowerment."

Mary Kate Hurlbutt said in an Instagram post in late July that she was disappointed in SoulCycle's "historical lack of time, energy, and resources that go toward creating a safe and inclusive environment for staff and riders alike."

Similarly, Soeuraya Wilson, who had been described as SoulCycle's poster-child instructor, said in a post in mid-July: "I can no longer allow my body to be used by a company that ultimately stands alongside it's investors and individuals who continue to support racism and bigotry without true compassion for the health and wellness of the employees and riders." Wilson added that SoulCycle and its leaders had "failed to lead."