

Former SoulCycle Executive Files Pregnancy Discrimination Lawsuit

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TOPLINE

Former SoulCycle executive Jordan Kafenbaum filed a pregnancy discrimination complaint against the company, claiming she was demoted after disclosing she was pregnant and later laid off 32 days after giving birth as SoulCycle is the latest millennial-beloved company to face criticism for toxic workplace allegations.

KEY FACTS

Kafenbaum had worked at SoulCycle for nearly seven years, most recently as the senior director of instructor programming and talent management, before she was laid off on April 27 just weeks after giving birth on March 25, according to the complaint filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in New York.

Kafenbaum was told her position was eliminated because of financial concerns tied to the coronavirus pandemic, but the complaint alleges that she was discriminated against for being pregnant and that the company's outward messages about "equality" and "inclusion" are not always practiced internally.

Months after disclosing her pregnancy in September, SoulCycle leadership told Kafenbaum in February that she would be moved to a new position which she saw as a demotion, and the complaint says she was offered "inconsistent excuses" for why she would be moved to a different position after returning from maternity leave.

The complaint claims former CEO Melanie Whelan told Gary Gaines, the company's senior vice president of global operations and studio experience, that "paternity leave is for pussies" in August 2019 after he had planned to take it.

A SoulCycle representative said Kafenbaum was laid off as part of a "necessary restructuring due to the impact of Covid-19," that she was paid for the entirety of her maternity leave and provided severance and that the company "strongly disagrees with the accusations" and "intends to vigorously defend itself."

The complaint alleges that three other women who had their positions eliminated around the same time had either recently returned from maternity leave or were pregnant.

key background

Two instructors recently quit because of concerns about inclusion at SoulCycle. Instructor 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." Instructor Soeuraya Wilson said in an Instagram post late last month, "I can no longer allow my body to be used by a company that ultimately stands alongside [its] investors and individuals who continue to support racism and bigotry without true compassion for the health and wellness of the employees and riders," adding that SoulCycle and its leaders had "failed to lead."

surprising fact

SoulCycle faced social media backlash in August 2019, after billionaire Stephen Ross, a investor in SoulCycle parent Equinox, said he would host a fundraiser for President Donald Trump's reelection campaign. Equinox and SoulCycle posted letters on Instagram addressing the backlash. Both state Ross is a "passive investor" and "not involved" in directing either business.

tangent

In recent months, one high-profile female founder after another has stepped down following workplace allegations— the Wing's Audrey Gelman, Refinery29's Christene Barberich, Band.o's Jen Gotch, Reformation's Yael Aflalo, Manrepeller's Leandra Medine Cohen and Girlboss' Sophia Amoruso and Away's Steph Korey. Like with SoulCycle, the employee complaints suggest the outward perception of the company does not always match the company culture.