

'...Treats Black Employees Like Second-Class Citizens': Amazon Executive Alleges Sexual Harassment, Pattern of Racial Discrimination In Federal Lawsuit

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During an Amazon company banquet in 2018, a supervisor of Charlotte Newman, from her account, reached underneath the dinner table and groped her thigh.

As she was leaving another outing with co-workers several months later, Newman alleges the same supervisor grabbed her hair, yanked her braids and joked, "You can leave this behind."

Newman, a 39-year-old Black woman, says such casual acts of sexual harassment are fostered at Amazon because company executives harbor negative misconceptions about African-American and female employees. Those entrenched stereotypes, she claims, are evident in the company's lack of Black leadership.



Charlotte Newman (Photo: Twitter/Charlotte Newman)

She claims she endured years of sexual abuse, civil rights and equal pay violations, and was unfairly passed over for positions in the company's upper ranks. Positions she claims were given to white colleagues who oftentimes had less experience than her.

Now Newman is taking on her employer, one of the largest corporations in the world, in federal court. Newman claims, in a discrimination lawsuit filed this month, that the online retail behemoth exhibited a pattern of discriminatory practices that prevented her from advancement.

“There’s a problem with the culture and the practices,” she told [CBS This Morning](#). “It’s time for Amazon to act with the same obsession internally, with the same rigor, that we approach our businesses and our customers.”

Newman is seeking compensation for years of lost wages, emotional distress and punitive damages for the sexual abuse she said she’s endured.

Newman, now a senior manager at Amazon, filed her lawsuit March 1 in a U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C. She is being represented by attorneys Douglas Wigdor and Lawrence Pearson of the New York City-based employment law firm Wigdor LLP.

“As one of the largest and most powerful companies in the world, Amazon has an obligation to lead by example and promote a level playing field for all workers regardless of their race,” Wigdor said in a statement. “Sadly, despite its emphasis on innovation, Amazon still treats Black employees like second-class citizens by shutting them out of high-level corporate roles, paying them less than similarly situated white employees, and dismissing their concerns about equity and safety.”

The 63-page complaint names Amazon.com and its web services subsidiary. Three top-level executives also are listed individually as defendants.

Among them is Andy Maz, Amazon’s former public policy director. He was fired in October after the company investigated Newman’s claims of sexual misconduct against him.

Newman says she also encountered a systemic pattern of racism and sexism at the company. The Harvard Business School graduate came to Amazon after serving as one of U.S. Senator Cory Booker’s top economic policy advisors for three years.

Booker lent his support in a March 2 tweet, sharing a link to a news story on Newman’s fight against Amazon.

“For years, Charlotte served with integrity & professionalism as a policy advisor on my team,” the senator wrote. “I have deep respect for her & I am proud of her extraordinary strength & courage. Her story is alarming. Racism, misogyny & harassment have no place anywhere.”

Amazon hired Newman as a public policy manager in January 2017 although she applied for and said she was qualified for the higher-ranking senior manager position. She indicated she was assigned senior management duties shortly after joining the company, but was paid at the lower rate. It wasn’t until October 2019, nearly three years into her tenure, that she was promoted to the senior position.

According to Newman's complaint, Amazon used a practice known as "de-leveling," of hiring Black employees in positions below those they were qualified for and paying them less than white employees with comparable experience.

"Their practices when it comes to hiring and promoting Black people and other underrepresented minorities to high-level positions (and paying them commensurately) perpetuate decades-old patterns of discrimination," the lawsuit states.

An Amazon spokesman said company officials reviewed Newman's interview process, her onboarding and leveling history at Amazon. They found that "she was properly placed in her role at the company."

But Newman insists her managers bought into negative stereotypes of Black women, and those sentiments held her back.

Newman cited a report that focused on trends in Amazon's leadership and workforce demographics. The analysis showed that 85 percent of the company's Black employees were warehouse workers. Virtually none of the senior management-level employees were Black and there had been just one Black member on Amazon's board of directors in 25 years.

A company spokesman told CBS that Amazon made commitments to bolster its diversity among executives and doubled the number of Black directors and vice presidents in 2020. The spokesperson said Amazon has set a goal to do the same in 2021.

"We do not tolerate discrimination or harassment in any form," Amazon said in a company statement. "We work hard to make Amazon a company where our Black employees and people of all backgrounds feel included, respected, and want to grow their careers."

There is precedence for many of the claims central to Newman's lawsuit. Recode, a Vox website that focuses on digital news, highlighted the concerns in an expose last month.

Nearly a dozen former and current Black employees interviewed by Recode agreed that Amazon fails to make African American professionals feel welcome and appreciated. They criticized the global e-commerce giant's promotion practices and said Black employees are routinely given lower evaluations.

"We struggle to bring [Black] folks in because there's not a whole lot of desire, in my opinion, to go outside of our normal practices," said one current Amazon diversity manager, who spoke to Recode on condition of anonymity. "And then when they do get here, it's harder to get promoted, harder to get top-tier rated, and easier to get lowest-tier. All those things combined make it so folks don't wanna stay. And folks will leave Amazon and go take on more senior roles elsewhere."



Charlotte Newman (Photo: Twitter/WigdorLaw)

On several occasions, Newman’s lawsuit alluded to a July 2017 meeting she had with her boss Steven Block. During the conversation, Block told her she was “too direct” and he characterized her as “just scary,” the suit alleges.

“You can intimidate people,” Newman said her boss told her. She went on to claim Black women at Amazon were often criticized for “not smiling or being friendly enough.”

At a team event, one of Newman’s co-workers blurted out “I think it would be really fun if Charlotte took a picture with the ‘Jambalaya’ wine bottle.”

And while Newman was shopping with a colleague during a November 2019 business trip, the co-worker told her “Oh my god, you look like a gorilla” when she tried on a black jacket.

Newman said the woman quickly apologized when she realized the implications of her comment.

“When a company’s top leaders traffic in stereotypes of Black employees and fail to condemn intimidation tactics, managers farther down the chain will take note of that modus operandi and behave accordingly,” the lawsuit alleged.

Later in the suit, Newman detailed the three occasions when Maz was allegedly inappropriate with her on business trips. Maz was one of Newman’s bosses to whom she reported.

The first encounter came in Chile in October 2017 when he flirted with Newman at a restaurant and told her she was beautiful.

At a dinner in Washington D.C. in January 2018, Maz upped the ante. During the dinner, he reached under the table and put his hand in Newman’s lap, according to the lawsuit. She said he groped her upper thigh, prompting her to bolt from the bathroom where she broke down and cried. Later in the evening, as Newman waited outside for her ride, she said Maz begged her to go home with him and have sex.

Despite being traumatized by the incident, Newman said she didn’t report Maz because she feared retaliation. Instead she claims she “dodged” him as much as she could in the office and on business calls.

But she reportedly was unable to avoid Maz’s aggressive behavior during a business trip to Seattle later in 2018. Several co-workers were hanging out at a rooftop bar. When Newman told the group she was turning in for the night, she said Maz grabbed her long braids and yanked her hair.

Other co-workers convinced her to stay for dinner and to have a belated birthday toast. Maz sidled up to her as they waited outside a pizzeria and put his arm around her, she said. He said, “Let’s pretend we’re boyfriend and girlfriend.”

It was not until the pandemic hit last spring and employees started working remotely that Newman said she felt comfortable enough to report Maz’s behavior. She did so in June 2020 and also complained about what she views as management’s discriminatory practices.

“Amazon needs to do more than just make statements about Black Lives Matter, and make statements about what they’re doing for Black employees and other employees of color. And have that actually show up in how employees are being treated,” Newman said during her CBS interview, referencing Bezos and the company’s calls for police reforms last summer after George Floyd’s death.