

Amazon accused of systematic gender discrimination in pay

November 22 2023, by Lauren Rosenblatt, The Seattle Times



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Three current Amazon employees say the company has created sexist pay practices and retaliated against them for complaining of gender-based discrimination, according to a proposed class-action lawsuit filed

Monday in Seattle.

Caroline Wilmuth, Katherine Schomer and Erin Combs—who were all part of Amazon's Worldwide Communications team—said they were paid far less than their male colleagues, including, in at least one case, men they supervised.

In an interview with The Seattle Times, Combs said there's a "myriad of major and minor examples" of systematic gender discrimination in pay at Amazon—and she's heard complaints from across the company.

"The way that I and my female peers are spoken to, the opportunities that we collectively are given, the visibility and access to leaders that the women have is markedly different than that of our male peers," said Combs, who has worked at Amazon since 2020 as a brand and marketing strategist.

After repeatedly raising concerns with managers and Amazon's human resources department, all three women said the company stripped them of their responsibilities and leadership roles. The three still work at Amazon but say they faced retaliation, including monitoring their performance in a way that makes Schomer feel "threatened."

Amazon spokesperson Brad Glasser said the company believes "these claims are false and will demonstrate that through the legal process."

Amazon says it does not tolerate discrimination and investigates all reported incidents. Globally, women in Amazon's workforce earned 99.6 cents for every dollar that men earned performing the same jobs in 2022, Amazon says.

Amazon's salary structure for its corporate workforce slots employees into levels on a scale that runs from 4 to 12. The proposed class-action

[lawsuit](#), filed by Cassandra Lenning from the New York-based firm Outten & Golden, seeks to represent all women who worked for Amazon in the past three years who were in job levels 4 through 8.

In the lawsuit, Wilmuth accused Amazon of misclassifying her into a lower-paying job category that "was not reflective of the role she performed."

Wilmuth, who joined Amazon's communications team in 2017 and later formed a research group to analyze Amazon's reputation internally and externally, was the only person on her team with a doctoral degree who was classified in a lower compensation code, she alleged. Her pay was far lower than two male colleagues who reported to her, according to the lawsuit. One of those colleagues was paid \$190,000 more than Wilmuth.

A male colleague who ran a similar-sized team and reported to the same manager as Wilmuth was classified as a level 8 while Wilmuth was a level 7. She was promised a promotion that never materialized.

Schomer, who started at Amazon in 2019 and helped Wilmuth's team with "sensitive exploratory projects" about employee safety and data privacy, said Amazon underpaid her on two separate teams. In one instance, she made less money as a level 7 than a male colleague who was slotted as a level 6. In another, a male co-worker who was slotted as the same rank and performing the same work on the same team made 150% of Schomer's salary, according to the lawsuit.

"There is a sense that your compensation is a reflection of your worth to the company," Combs said. "To be successful by all other measures and then discover that you're being paid less or your work is being taken away, there's just a real sense of injustice."

Amazon has faced criticism for its pay structure in the past.

In 2021, current and former Amazon employees filed five discrimination lawsuits against Amazon, alleging the company fosters a culture in which they were sexually harassed, paid less than male peers, referred to with racial slurs and retaliated against. Charlotte Newman, a Black woman who worked for Amazon Web Services, filed a federal suit against the company in Washington, D.C., that same year alleging Amazon paid her less than similarly qualified white peers.

In addition to pay inequality, Wilmuth, Combs and Schomer said they were also subjected to discriminatory treatment at Amazon because of their gender. Because the three women were on the same team, they said it was easy to recognize they were having similar experiences.

Combs said it was helpful to hear that Wilmuth, then her manager, had been going through the same thing.

"It made me feel a little less crazy," she said.

Wilmuth said hearing from Combs also made her want to take action. "It's one thing when it's happening to you," she said. "It's another when it's happening to people on your team who you are responsible for."

Wilmuth and Combs said one male colleague they worked with devalued and questioned their expertise, undermined their work, and routinely spoke to them in an unprofessional and condescending manner. Combs said that colleague removed her name and her team from a joint paper she had worked on before circulating the paper to a group of Amazon stakeholders.

Amazon "materially diminished" Wilmuth and Comb's own roles, while expanding this male colleague's team, scope and responsibility, attorneys for the women said in the lawsuit.

The three women said they had raised concerns over the last year and a half with their manager, their bosses' bosses and the human resources department—but the company took no action. Instead, the women said they faced retaliation, including lost job responsibilities, [leadership roles](#) and promotion opportunities.

When Wilmuth told her boss about the allegations, her manager responded that she "used to cry almost every day ... because of how she was treated." But, Wilmuth's manager continued, "that is just the way Amazon is."

The next week, Wilmuth's manager said Wilmuth was not ready to be promoted because she had raised concerns about mistreatment at the company, according to the lawsuit.

Last November, Wilmuth submitted a written complaint to Amazon's HR department and notified the member of Amazon's executive team overseeing her department, Drew Herdener. According to the lawsuit, Herdener dismissed Wilmuth's concerns as "nothing more than a 'personality clash.'" "

In December, Amazon demoted all three women, according to the lawsuit. The company removed Wilmuth's 14-person team from under her purview and told her she no longer had a role on the research team she had founded and run for 3.5 years.

Schomer said Amazon also removed most of her job responsibilities and two-thirds of her staff while Combs said the company removed her from a leadership role and reduced the scope of work by 75%.

"My role itself is just a daily reminder of the denotation and retaliation I experienced," Wilmuth said. "We were success stories, until it was all taken away."

Amazon has not yet responded to the lawsuit in court. The suit was filed in U.S. District Court in Seattle. Attorneys for the [women](#) have asked that they be allowed to pursue the matter as a class action, which would allow them to seek compensation on behalf of Amazon employees who faced similar treatment by the [company](#).

2023 The Seattle Times. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Amazon accused of systematic gender discrimination in pay (2023, November 22)
retrieved 28 April 2024 from

<https://techxplore.com/news/2023-11-amazon-accused-systematic-gender-discrimination.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.