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# Jim DeFede, CBS Miami Management Accused of Bullying and Harassing Veteran Reporter

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After working as a TV reporter in Los Angeles, Michele Gillen joined WFOR, Miami's CBS affiliate, in 1997. Since then, she's been nominated for 46 regional Emmys and won 25.

But she says her career as an investigative reporter suffered because of a culture of sexism, bullying, and harassment at the network. In a gender- and age-discrimination

lawsuit filed this past Friday in Miami federal court, Gillen says she endured so much sexist harassment from colleagues that showing up to work at the station eventually made her physically ill. After she filed harassment claims with the company's human resources department, she says, she was removed as an anchor from her public-affairs show, *Focus on South Florida*.

"The careers of an untold number of talented women at CBS have been extinguished, and those who report violations of CBS anti-discrimination policy, including reports to the CBS legal department in New York, face career-ending retaliation," reads

her legal complaint, which was first reported by *the Hollywood Reporter*.

Representatives for Gillen and for WFOR did not immediately return messages from *New Times*. A spokesperson for CBS Television Stations told *New Times* that the Miami affiliate did nothing wrong.

“We are confident that Michele Gillen was treated fairly when she worked for WFOR-TV, and station management’s decision to not renew her contract in 2016 was justified,” a corporate spokesperson said via email. “Her claims are factually inaccurate and will not survive scrutiny.”

It should be noted that Les Moonves, the chairman and CEO of CBS Corporation – the local affiliate's parent – resigned this past September 9 after allegations he sexually harassed several women.

In the lawsuit, Gillen singles out local CBS anchor and investigative reporter Jim DeFede for allegedly routinely bullying her. DeFede, who joined CBS Miami after working at *Miami New Times* and the *Miami Herald*, began as Gillen's junior colleague in the station's investigative unit. He now hosts *Facing South Florida*, where he moderates debates between political candidates and interviews prominent lawmakers. DeFede has repeatedly referenced the #MeToo movement on his program and earlier this year questioned whether congressional candidate Donna Shalala was a hypocrite for supporting the movement **even though she worked under Bill Clinton, who has been repeatedly accused of sexual misconduct.**

But behind the scenes, Gillen claims, DeFede regularly made disparaging remarks to her and about women in general. During one 2014 exchange, Gillen says, DeFede exploded at her in front of their colleagues and then disparaged the station's female viewers as a whole.

Her lawsuit claims DeFede said he did not want to bother figuring out what stories will “attract women who are menstruating and watching *Blue Bloods*,” a TV program starring Tom Selleck. Some of those claims had already leaked – local blogger Jose Lambiet **reported on portions of the incident after it happened in 2014.** Lambiet wrote that DeFede criticized the whole investigative reporting team before blasting Gillen specifically.

In an email attached to the lawsuit, Jilda Unruh, another female colleague who witnessed the exchange, backed up Gillen's claims and said DeFede harassed the veteran reporter in front of the rest of the staff.

"Even if everything he said was true, Jim was way out of line," wrote Unruh, who did not immediately respond to *New Times'* request for comment. "What he said was vile. He was bullying, as is his reputation." Unruh later added, "Not much offends me, but that comment about menstruating is indicative of what I believe to be his misogynistic views about women, his belief that he is a News God, and [that] he gets to play by different rules than everyone else." Unruh said no one else in the meeting spoke up to defend Gillen.

Reached by phone, DeFede said he could not comment and referred a *New Times* reporter to WFOR management.

In the lawsuit, Gillen says she saw "woman after woman" over the age of 40 face discrimination through abusive treatment and prevented opportunities – then be systemically pushed out. Those who went to human resources found resistance in the form of questions such as "Are you sure you want me to write your complaint down and send it to New York?" Ultimately, many of them simply walked away by resigning or signing confidentiality agreements, she says.

That misogyny was endemic throughout the station, according to the complaint. In the sales department, a manager scheduling a meeting with a female buyer once yelled across the room: "Do we want to set up a meeting with [*name omitted*] today, or is she on the rag?"

Elsewhere, Gillen says, the station failed to support her stories, both emotionally and financially. She says she was often belittled for pitching stories that wound up winning awards, including Emmys. She says she was even forced to front the production costs for multiple pieces despite the fact that other investigative reporters, including DeFede, were not required to do the same.

Gillen also says her two female bosses – manager Cari Hernandez and news director Liz Roldan – regularly "rejected" her story ideas but then passed those pitches along to men or younger women on the staff. In one case, she was edited out of her own segments, she says. In another instance, she was asked to consult on a story about identifying criminals even though she says station management knew the entire time that CBS planned to give the story – and her work – to DeFede.

Gillen took a voluntary leave of absence sometime after the "menstruation" incident. Her first day back at work, she says, she sent a formal HR complaint against DeFede, Hernandez, and Roldan from her home computer before driving into work. When she arrived at the station, she was told she'd been removed from anchoring *Focus on South Florida*. A younger reporter, Irika Sargent, replaced her. Gillen says she went directly to Roldan's office to say she believed she was being attacked for speaking out.

"I guess you are aware that I filed a formal complaint for discrimination," Gillen said, per the suit. "I am aghast that a few hours later my show was taken from me. I consider this retaliation."

"God damn it, no one was supposed to tell you," Roldan allegedly responded. "No one can keep a secret in this newsroom. It is just a business decision for us. Don't take it personally. Nobody knows [Sargent]. She is the new anchor – she needs the visibility."

In the meantime, the suit says, DeFede was never removed from his role on *Facing South Florida*, though he was the one accused of bullying and harassment.

She says her female bosses also disparaged her. Hernandez allegedly said, "I can't stand that old bitch" – a comment heard by cameraman Muhamad Hassan, who corroborates the claim in an email attached to Gillen's lawsuit. (Hassan filed a separate complaint for age discrimination that was settled with the station, according to the lawsuit.)

After Gillen reported the alleged harassment to CBS's corporate human resources office, she said the network's so-called internal investigation was a farce and that HR representatives made inappropriate comments such as telling her she could not file a gender-discrimination claim because some of her bosses were female. In another instance, she says, HR reps told her that they "must rely on the man upstairs" (meaning God) and that "bad karma will catch up with the people doing this."

Following DeFede's alleged blowup, Gillen says, an HR rep from New York visited the Miami station. After Gillen told the rep that work stress was making her ill, the HR employee told her DeFede had done nothing wrong, Gillen says. "There was no policy violation in there," the employee allegedly stated. "Tempers flair [*sic*]." Gillen, in the suit, says the only "temper that flared was DeFede's." Gillen also claims the company rep said that "favoritism is not illegal."

Gillen says she also asked the station's general manager, Adam Levy, whether anyone had investigated the incident while she was on leave. She says she was told that Levy took the male witnesses out for coffee without speaking to any female witnesses. After Gillen expressed her displeasure, she says, the corporate HR representative responded by asking, "What would you like us to do, interview 100 people?"

Gillen says she was fired in 2016 by Levy, who told her she was not producing enough content to justify her salary. She says she asked why the station wouldn't offer a pay cut. Levy reportedly responded, "We don't want you working here."

At the time, she says, she was the only female investigative reporter on the staff.

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