

Trump administration lawsuit says a women's retreat is discrimination

The lawsuit against a Coca-Cola distributor signals a historic shift for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which enforces federal law on workplace bias.

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Andrea Lucas, chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, has encouraged men to tell the agency if they feel they've experienced discrimination. (Mariam Zuhaib/AP)



By [Joanna Slater](#)

As company networking events go, it was unremarkable: About 250 female employees of a Coca-Cola distributor gathered inside the ballroom of a Connecticut casino for a day of speakers and team-building exercises, preceded the night before by cocktails and dinner. The theme: “Embrace Your Authenticity.”

The event, held in late 2024, offered the women a chance to mingle with higher-ups and bond over their shared challenges in a male-dominated workplace, said one participant. It was fun, energizing and useful, she said.

According to [a new lawsuit](#) from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, it was also illegal.

Last month, the EEOC [sued](#) Coca-Cola Beverages Northeast, the Japanese-owned bottler that distributes soda in the region, saying the women’s event was a form of unlawful discrimination against male employees under federal civil rights law. The agency is seeking unspecified compensatory and punitive damages.

It's the first EEOC lawsuit filed over a corporate diversity, equity and inclusion program, part of a sweeping effort by the Trump administration to stamp out what it describes as illegal discrimination.

But more such cases could be imminent. In December, a month after Trump designated her EEOC chair, Andrea Lucas issued an unusual public appeal, asking White men who feel they have experienced discrimination at work to contact the agency "as soon as possible." In February, she said women-only networking events would create "new girls clubs" that operate like the "old boys clubs" before them, likening them to racially segregated employee social events of the 1970s.

The agency is already investigating footwear giant Nike and financial services firm Northwestern Mutual over their corporate diversity initiatives.

Peter Bennett, a lawyer representing Coca-Cola Beverages Northeast, said in a statement that the 2024 event "fully complied with existing EEOC regulation" and the company found it "disappointing that the EEOC did not conduct a full investigation."

A spokesperson for the EEOC declined to respond to questions about the case, saying the agency does not comment on ongoing litigation.

For experts, the case is emblematic of the way conservatives have dramatically shifted the terrain on questions of diversity and affirmative action in recent years. Now corporate programs with “relatively small stakes like this one” could spark legal action, said Katie Eyer, a law professor at Rutgers University.

“Five years ago, people would have said there is no legal risk” to the Coca-Cola bottler in organizing this event, Eyer said. “But most people would not say that today.”



The EEOC sued Coca-Cola Beverages Northeast, alleging a women's networking event was illegal discrimination against men. (Michael Dwyer/AP)

It's also a sea change for the EEOC, a 62-year-old agency that enforces federal law on bias and harassment in the workplace.

The EEOC's priority has “never been bringing lawsuits on behalf of White males in reverse discrimination situations,” said Gerald Maatman, an employment law expert and partner at the law firm Duane Morris. Instead, the agency operated as the “guardian” of vulnerable workers who wouldn't be able to pursue such claims on their own.

Maatman says he receives near-daily calls from executives who want to help various groups of people in their company succeed but also don't want to get sued. He tells clients that any mentoring or managerial training program must be open to anyone and offer an equal opportunity to participate.

"The advice at this point is, "The world has changed," Maatman said.

Founded in 1977 and headquartered in New Hampshire, Coca-Cola Beverages Northeast employs 3,400 people who bottle, pack, deliver and sell Coke products across the region from Boston to Upstate New York.

More than 85 percent of those employees are men. So back in 2024, the company decided to hold its first in-person Women's Forum.

Before the event, Bennett said, the company notified its 11 unions, asking whether they had any objections. None did.

At the event, the attendees heard from women executives who described their career paths and watched a demonstration by a trainer of service dogs sponsored by the company.

Sitting at round tables in a ballroom, they talked with colleagues around the region about strategies for dealing with business scenarios and about the specific issues they face as women.

"Being a woman is kind of tough in the industry," said the participant, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because she was not authorized to speak with the media. "Sometimes you have different hurdles than men do." Until very recently, she said, she was the only woman in her role at a regional office.



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A screenshot of a social media post from a Coca-Cola Beverages Northeast women's networking event. (Courtesy Coca-Cola Beverages Northeast)

After the September 2024 event, a male production employee of the company filed a formal complaint with the EEOC. Nearly four months passed. Then, in mid-January 2025, toward the end of the transition to the Trump administration, the EEOC issued a letter saying it had found “reasonable cause” to believe that the company had violated federal civil rights law, at which point the two parties began talks on a potential settlement. Those negotiations broke down in August 2025, the agency’s lawsuit says.

Experts say the EEOC receives tens of thousands of discrimination complaints each year but investigates only a fraction of those cases because of limited resources. Even fewer, perhaps a couple hundred annually, become the subject of lawsuits.

Usually, those cases involve instances of “substantial workplace harm,” said Jenny Yang, a former chair of the EEOC and partner at Outten & Golden, such as pay disparities and harassment, not a single networking event as in the Coca-Cola distributor case.

“There has been a sustained effort to locate a DEI-focused challenge for at least a year,” Yang said. “It’s telling us they didn’t have a stronger case to file.”

The Coca-Cola distributor has yet to respond in court to the EEOC lawsuit. A 2023 Supreme Court decision lowered the threshold for the harms that workers must demonstrate in employment cases, which could bolster the agency’s case.

Over those months, the Trump administration deployed every available tool to advance its own civil rights agenda, one in which diversity programs were anathema. President Donald Trump quickly signed executive orders aimed at dismantling DEI efforts, including rescinding a 1965 order put in place by President Lyndon B. Johnson that required federal contractors to develop affirmative action plans. In a break with precedent, Trump also fired two Democratic EEOC commissioners days after he was sworn in.

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The government is relying on the language of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits employers from discriminating against individuals on their “compensation, terms, conditions or privileges of employment” based on sex, race, religion or national origin.

That statute was passed with the intent to remedy existing forms of discrimination, said Victoria Lipnic, a former EEOC acting chair and partner at Resolution Economics, and for decades, corporate America devised programs to promote equal opportunity for disadvantaged groups. But now, such programs are “bumping up against the neutral language of the statute,” Lipnic said.

The employee who attended the 2024 event wasn't aware it had triggered a lawsuit. She said she thought it should happen every year. She still uses some of the lessons she gleaned there in her work, she said, including strategies for remaining calm when dealing with an irate customer.

“Everyone could just kind of be free and talk about their struggles,” she said. “It's very empowering for women to get in the same room.”