

Premium HOME > NEWS

United Way, one of the US's largest nonprofits, has a history of rewarding people who engaged in sexist behavior, former employees say

Yelena Dzhanova 7 hours ago



United Way CEO Brian Gallagher. [Nick Wass/AP Images for United Way Worldwide](#)

- **Leadership at United Way Worldwide, one of the largest nonprofits in the US, has consistently ignored allegations of inappropriate behavior, even engaging in bullying tactics to suppress women coming forward with them, nine former employees said.**
- **These former employees accused the organization's CEO, Brian Gallagher, of working hard to preserve a boys' club that excludes women and often promotes men who engage in sexist behavior.**

- **Ex-employees also allege that the exclusion of female employees is facilitated by the organization's human-resources department, which is run by women.**
- **Multiple women also say women of color in particular have been dismissed and treated as "inconveniences" despite having advanced degrees and being well-respected in their fields.**
- **United Way Worldwide's board of trustees said in a statement that it was "deeply disturbed by any allegations of misconduct and pledges to eradicate such behavior from our organization."**
- [Visit Business Insider's homepage for more stories.](#)

Top leadership at United Way Worldwide, one of the largest nonprofits in the US, has a history of sexism and rewarding people who engage in it, according to nine former employees and executives.

These employees detailed a culture of misogyny they say spans decades. They say top-level male leadership, including CEO Brian Gallagher and members of the organization's human-resources team, have for years shunned women who came forward with harassment allegations and bullied them into staying silent.

Years later, many of these women, who no longer work for the organization, say they're scared to publicly come forward. Upon leaving the organization, most of them signed nondisclosure agreements that bar them from openly disparaging the company. Multiple women who spoke with Insider said they were worried their career prospects would tank if their identities were publicly revealed. Their identities are known to Insider.

United Way Worldwide, which boasts an annual revenue of [\\$3.6 billion](#), is so large that it touches and intersects with wide swaths of both the nonprofit and the corporate sectors. Former employees said they believed in and stood by the organization's mission to spur positive change through social initiatives, programs, and corporate partnerships. But at the same time, they argue that the group's [millions of donors worldwide](#) deserve to know about the internal turmoil that they say top leadership has failed to disclose.

In November, [HuffPost](#) published a look into the retaliation former employees said they faced for coming forward with allegations of sexual harassment and a "boys' club" culture. According to the report, two women were fired after speaking up about sexual harassment they experienced at work. Three filed complaints.

Insider learned the allegations of improper behavior and retaliation were not just limited to three women's accounts.

Former employees detail misogyny, a 'womanizer,' and feeling passed over for promotions

For decades, misogyny has been rampant across the organization's leadership, according to detailed accounts from nine former United Way workers employed at the organization from the early 1990s to the beginning of 2020.

Former Chief Operating Officer Joe Haggerty, who was in the role from 2005 to 2015, was widely known as a "womanizer," multiple former employees alleged. He began his career at one of the local United Way chapters, starting as CEO of the greater Los Angeles branch in 1995 before advancing to the

national leadership board, according to his LinkedIn [profile](#) and two women who detailed his history at the company.

When Haggerty transitioned into the national-board role, word had spread from employees at the Los Angeles chapter to those working in corporate. One former United Way Worldwide employee recalled warning signs she received about Haggerty.

"When interacting with community members in the greater Los Angeles area, different people, leaders of different organizations, NGOs, and foundations, have said to me directly, 'Oh, did you work with that womanizer Joe Haggerty?'" she said.

Another former employee said her female mentors cautioned her to "stay away from this guy" and "warn" all of her friends to do the same.

"You couldn't have a conversation with this guy in a social setting where the conversation didn't turn to sex in some sort of way," she said. When engaging with female donors or corporate leaders, Haggerty often spoke about how long he could last in bed with these women, the former employee said. In some cases, women formed a "barrier" between other female employees and Haggerty, another former employee said.

Gallagher, the national organization's CEO, hired Haggerty. The two have been friends for decades and "came up through the United Way system together," one former employee said.

Multiple former employees described Gallagher's inner circle as impenetrable for women and emblematic of a culture that repeatedly shut them out. Multiple former executives said Gallagher knew of Haggerty's inappropriate behavior before he joined the national team but hired him anyway.

When reached for comment, Haggerty, who is now the CEO of the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce, denied all allegations, telling Insider he never talked about sex with female donors or corporate leaders.

"I'm really surprised to see some of this," he said. "I was in hundreds and hundreds of meetings working for the United Way, with lots of people all the time, usually with board members or with other people. And there's just no room for any of that kind of behavior where you start talking about sex with people. So it just didn't happen."

Bill Kitson resigned as CEO of United Way of Greater Cleveland in February 2016. An organization press release from the time said he left to "pursue other opportunities," a reason he repeated to Insider when reached for comment.

But one former employee said Kitson had resigned after he was accused of sexual misconduct with a subordinate. In a February story, the Ohio newspaper [Cleveland Scene](#) said Kitson "had been permitted to quietly resign after behavior involving a subordinate employee became impossible to ignore."

Four months later, Kitson became a consultant at United Way Worldwide, according to his [LinkedIn profile](#) and a former executive at the company. Kitson appears to be still employed at the national level as the organization's director of the US central region.

"There were lots of rumors flying around when I left," Kitson told Insider in an email. "I can say in my personal life my family and I were facing lots of issues that needed my attention."

Nepotism, according to four former employees, also influenced the boys' club culture at United Way. Gallagher was a family friend of a man who had advanced to three director- and high-level positions shortly after he joined the national organization.

This man was "constantly given jobs that women couldn't compete for," one former employee said.

When a position opened up, women who asked C-suite executives about a job's vacancy or the chance to advance up the corporate ladder said they were told this man was set to occupy the role. "It's a done deal," the C-suite executives told the women. Over the years, the women said they learned that this man would slip into these roles without the company opening up the position to others. The hiring managers overseeing those roles did not respond to Insider's request for comment asking whether others had the chance to apply.

In 2010, he became the director of global programs. "We had women that were multilingual, had all the experience," another former female employee said, "but they weren't even able to compete."

Leila Roberts, who was at United Way until 2010, was the one who primed him for the role. She said she was told to teach this man "how to do a critical part of my job so he could take it over."

"It was a job that he had no background in," she added. "It involved understanding the international membership network intimately, which I did, and having had relationships with them in order to help them work through this strategy that I helped to create."

In Roberts' view, she said "he was very gently and lovingly being escorted along his professional path so that he could end up in a position of respect and power and authority."

The man in question denied the allegation that he wasn't qualified for the role, providing to Insider a statement outlining his experience and educational background from before he started the job. He said he received an MBA with an international-business concentration and had amassed multiple years of experience before starting in his previous director role.

Gallagher would announce this man's advancements casually during staff meetings, and nobody ever questioned it, one former United Way vice president said.

Roberts said she negotiated with senior management and said she would walk the man through the foundation of her job in exchange for help securing a strategy position the next year, but her boss never committed. "I checked in quarterly with my boss' boss. Quarter passed — second quarter, third quarter. By the fourth quarter, I had my resignation letter written," she said. "I submitted it."

For his part, Roberts said the man seemed "uncomfortable" when he learned she was leaving the company. "He was really tense and stiff" at Roberts' farewell party, she said.

Other women who talked to Insider said it was common for seemingly unqualified and inexperienced men to be hired into high-level roles. Gallagher and Haggerty were the ones frequently pitching such men and giving them generous recommendations, they said.

United Way Worldwide did not respond to Insider's specific questions about the allegations detailed in this article. But the organization's board of trustees said in a statement to Insider that it was "deeply disturbed by any allegations of misconduct and pledges to eradicate such behavior from our organization."

The board added that it had "authorized an independent third-party investigation of the process by which certain allegations were handled, all relevant policies and procedures, and an assessment of the corporate culture that might have fostered any such conduct." It's unclear whether this investigation will involve talking to any former employees.

Former employees say it was a 'boys' club'

The first United Way opened in Denver in [1887](#). Five people came together to support 10 health and welfare agencies in the region.

About 130 years later, United Way expanded into a sprawling network of local chapters. Today there are about 1,800 local United Way chapters in 40 countries and territories, according to the organization's [website](#).

The organization raises money for issues, hosts volunteering opportunities, and provides expertise on broad concerns like education, health, and disaster relief. While its reputation and mission seem admirable to the public, former employees said internally the nonprofit felt like a boys' club.

They said male executives would often make decisions over brandy and cigars, and they frequently felt excluded from joining in on these activities.

One former employee claimed she was passed for a promotion because she was pregnant.

"We could promote you, but you need to stop having babies," she said she was told by a male executive. "A C-suite person told me that of course they've wanted to put me on the [promotion], and then he gestured to my stomach because I was pregnant."

Despite her excellent performance reviews, the former employee said she was passed over in favor of a man who wore "inappropriate shirts into the office." She said one of the shirts read, "You're going to hell for what your mind is thinking about me right now." The man who had entered that role instead of her, she said, was good friends with Gallagher and Brian Lachance, the organization's chief of staff who's employed there today in the same role.

The man began to miss several days of work. The former employee said out of concern for the man, she asked the human-resources department to check on him. But after voicing her worries, her next performance review was suddenly strewn with poor feedback, she said. The employee said she was told she didn't have "good communication skills." This was the first time she had received negative feedback in her years long career at the organization, and HR told her she had the option to leave the company if she wasn't happy there, she said.

"You're a truth teller," the woman said Lachance told her. "We don't appreciate that." The woman described him as one of Gallagher's "henchmen."

Other accounts from former employees also emphasized a boys' club culture at the base of the organization.

Lisa Bowman, the organization's former chief marketing officer, said Gallagher would "pull the guys off and go smoke cigars and leave the women to talk about 'girl stuff'" during annual executive retreats.

Bowman said she was fired in January after she complained about an executive vice president's inappropriate behavior. She filed a charge of discrimination based on sex and retaliation against United Way, saying in an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaint obtained by Insider that her offender had behaved in an "intimidating manner."

In July 2018, during a meeting with Bowman, she said the executive vice president stood up and yelled abruptly. "This just isn't working for me," he shouted while in a small breakout session on a two-day executive-team retreat, according to the complaint. He "threw his things off the table and stormed out of the room," the complaint said.



United Way logo. [Photo Illustration by Igor Golovnirov/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images](#)

In October that year, Bowman met with a high-level officer to discuss her concerns about his outburst, the complaint said. Two months later in December, the man was promoted to executive vice president.

After his promotion, Bowman said the "intimidating" behavior continued. In January, he "made several comments about my appearance which made me uncomfortable and were inappropriate," the complaint said. "I was in tears."

Another woman complained to HR about the same man Bowman had reported. She said Gallagher protected the executive vice president and personally requested her termination after the complaint. The executive vice president is still employed at United Way, and the woman was fired.

United Way's misogynistic culture extended beyond the C-suite executives, a former employee said. One male employee at the director level called her a "MILF," she said. She said the same man once told her he'd help her resolve IT issues only if she'd "give him this girl" on her team in exchange.

In another instance, the woman said a C-suite executive who is about three decades her senior took her to lunch at a "really expensive restaurant." During the meal, she said he made inappropriate comments that left her "feeling really creeped out." She said he kept telling their waiter "how special I am" and berated his own wife, whom he called "a man-hater."

Other times, men were openly threatened that women might take the spotlight away from them, this former employee said. When Stacey Stewart, for example, served as the US president for United Way Worldwide, employees handling public relations for her were told to "make sure she doesn't outshine Brian Gallagher."

And at sexual-harassment trainings, the men would laugh and snicker, this former employee said.

Haggerty disagreed with the former employees who characterized United Way as a boys' club, saying more than half the nonprofit's staff and leadership was made up of women when he was there. But the former employees with whom Insider spoke did not call it a boys' club because of any issues with staffing ratios. Rather, they called it a boys' club because they said they felt the men protected one another and behaved in ways and participated in activities that often excluded them.

Haggerty also defended Gallagher, calling him "a very straight-up person" who wouldn't want to ignore allegations of harassment or a boys' club culture.

Gallagher did not return a request for comment from Insider.

Flanked by HR on all sides

Several of the women who spoke with Insider said a team of human-resources employees upheld the toxic environment by either dismissing or refusing to take seriously allegations that numerous people brought over the course of at least 10 years.

Haggerty oversaw the HR department while he was in the corporate role until 2015.

The head of the HR department, Patti Turner, was also an attorney representing the organization. Some women described Turner and Evelyn Amador, another HR rep, as Gallagher's "yes-women."

Amador's "job was to protect the organization, not to protect the employees," the former vice president said. "What it did for me was made me completely mistrustful of HR." That sentiment was shared widely among women in the organization, she added. Turner is still employed at the organization, but Amador is not, former employees said.

Haggerty defended Amador and Turner. "Patti's a very objective person," he said. Turner and Amador "weren't yes-people," he added. "They were always willing to investigate things and try to solve them."

One woman who worked for United Way Worldwide during Haggerty's tenure said Amador told her and others that she wasn't "going to move" complaints about pay equity and sexism forward. She said some of these complaints were about Haggerty, to whom Amador and Turner reported.

The HR department rejected these complaints multiple times, the woman said, and eventually women stopped reporting the sexist behavior of Haggerty and other men. Haggerty said "there were very few straight-up sexual-harassment complaints that I can remember at all" while he was employed at United Way.

In these ways, sources said, the HR team upheld and might have even helped advance the culture of harassment at United Way.

"I think it's problematic to talk about the culture as a purely all-boys network because that lets the women off the hook who were supporting, backing up, or reinforcing these behaviors," Roberts said.

Turner did not return Insider's request for comment, and contact information for Amador was not available.

United Way's enormous influence

Over the years, United Way Worldwide has partnered with more than [200 corporate sponsors](#), including large public companies like 3M, Starbucks, Salesforce, Lyft, and Johnson & Johnson. The nonprofit has also collaborated with huge sports enterprises such as the NFL and its many teams, as well as notable companies like Comcast, Scholastic, Deloitte, Pfizer, and Microsoft.

These corporate sponsors help United Way raise millions of dollars every year, according to the organization's [annual reports](#).

United Way is also deeply tied to dozens other nonprofit organizations. Most of the women who spoke to Insider did so on the condition of anonymity to protect themselves from legal repercussions and maintain their career prospects. Some of these women left United Way years ago but said they still fear coming forward publicly due to the power of current and former employees and the organization's previous retaliation efforts.

Gallagher in particular is deeply influential and well-known.

In 2017, Vice President Mike Pence personally appointed Gallagher to [join the board of trustees](#) for Indiana's Ball State University. Multiple former employees said they worried Gallagher could spoil their chances of ever landing another job in the nonprofit sector. And because of United's reach, the women worry they'll have hard times finding jobs even if they exit the nonprofit world and enter the private sector, they said.

Some women, upon leaving United Way, said they felt bullied into signing restrictive nondisclosure agreements.

"At the time that I was laid off, I had 14 weeks of severance pay coming and I wouldn't have gotten that if I didn't sign" the NDA, the former vice president said. "I did it very blindly without even thinking through the future consequences of it. So I'm kind of stuck," she said, adding that the organization "put in writing that they would — if I talked to the press or if I talked to anybody — they would sue me."

These NDAs contribute to the perpetuation of harassment issues in the nonprofit sector, said Ana Avendaño, United Way's former vice president for labor participation.

"The labor movement was built by men for the benefit of men," said Avendaño, who's now a professor at the City University of New York's School of Law. "They wanted women to stay in the home and believed that if women started to work, they would dilute labor standards." This history of exclusion has persisted through to the 21st century, she said.

Historically, when women have tried to level the playing field within the labor market, they faced retaliation and exclusion. In the male-dominated construction industry, for example, women who report harassment become victims of subtle aggression.

United Way is part of the labor market that has not taken any affirmative steps to address these issues and include women in the workplace, Avendaño said.

Avendaño last year filed an EEOC complaint saying she was being silenced by United and the AFL-CIO, the nation's largest labor organization, after uncovering sexual harassment within the labor network. This included women employed at United Way, who, she wrote in the complaint, were being harassed and groped by multiple labor leaders.

Richard Trumka, AFL-CIO's president, complained to Gallagher about Avendaño's work, according to the EEOC complaint, a copy of which Insider obtained. Gallagher told her Trumka objected to Avendaño "defaming good guys who have passed through his shop" and "got caught up in the #MeToo stuff," the complaint said.

Shortly after she and Gallagher spoke, Avendaño said she was fired. The AFL-CIO declined to comment.

Because she signed an NDA, Avendaño could not speak specifically to the allegations of sexual harassment at United Way. But similar to Avendaño, other women said they were fired or retaliated against after speaking up.

When Haggerty left United Way, Lori Malcolm, the organization's chief culture and operations officer, replaced him and began overseeing HR in 2016. She "didn't do anything" to stop Gallagher from issuing the termination of the woman who complained about the executive vice president, said one former United Way employee.

Malcolm also targeted Avendaño after her conversation with Gallagher, according to the EEOC complaint, reprimanding her for using an "aggressive" tone of voice. "Ms. Malcolm stated that my 'entire team' had complained that I was bullying them," Avendaño noted in the complaint.

Malcolm did not return Insider's request for comment.

Sidelining people of color

There was also an army of men keeping women of color and their concerns out of their orbit, multiple women said.

"Brian had what we thought of as like this protective group around him of white men," one former United Way employee said, adding that if any woman ever challenged Gallagher, they'd immediately get shut down.

During a meeting over a decade ago, one former employee said Gallagher isolated a group of people of color and asked them to stand in the middle of the room. It made the people of color feel uncomfortable and weirdly singled out, the former employee said.

When the employee pointed out it was inappropriate, a "shield" of white men defended Gallagher. "A bunch of white men basically said that my concerns were not real concerns," she said.

Roberts said she and her female colleagues shared their salaries and thought that the women of color in the group were underpaid, even though these were colleagues "who had master's degrees and were multilingual and had been working internationally, some of them for many years, and were extremely well-respected within their field and their network."

Women of color were also openly disregarded, former employees said.

"They were treated like inconveniences or as sources of information to teach the white people working at the organization how to operate on an international scale," Roberts said. She recalled a brown woman who pointed out an inappropriate remark during a meeting who got shut down.

"The culture never changed," said one woman who left more than five years ago.

One woman who spoke to Insider said she had issues with sexism from the mid-2000s until she left more than five years ago.

Her problems with United Way "are older than some other women's, so I was hopeful that some of these things had changed. But I don't see that they have."

When Roberts thinks back to working there, "I remember how intensely proud I was of being able to contribute to that mission and how much joy I took at working at the United Ways across the world."

"It felt like an honor to be doing this work, which made the rest of the toxic nonsense so deeply disappointing."