

United Way inquiry didn't contact women who filed complaints, they say

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- United Way Worldwide released the results of an investigation into claims of harassment and sexism.
- But three women who alleged they were fired for reporting harassment said they were not contacted.
- The investigation concluded the women were fired based on "legitimate" reasons.
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United Way Worldwide, one of the nation's largest nonprofits, released on Tuesday the [results of an investigation](#) spurred by allegations of sexism and harassment from multiple women.

Three women who spoke up about sexual harassment said they faced retaliation for doing so in a November report from [HuffPost](#), and more came forward in an [Insider story in December](#) with allegations that the nonprofit's culture of misogyny spanned decades.

The investigation carried out by a third-party law firm at the behest of United Way Worldwide found "the employment decisions made with respect to the three employees at issue were found to be based on legitimate, non-discriminatory, and non-retaliatory reasons."

But these three women told Insider that nobody reached out to them for the investigation, which led them to believe it was inadequate and poorly done.

The three women said they were fired after coming forward and filed claims with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the agency that investigates workplace sex

discrimination and retaliation.

Read more: [United Way, one of the US's largest nonprofits, has a history of rewarding people who engaged in sexist behavior, former employees say](#)

Lisa Bowman, the organization's former chief marketing officer, said in her EEOC claim obtained by Insider that she was fired in January 2020 after she complained about an executive vice president's inappropriate behavior.

Another woman told Insider she felt retaliated against after she came forward with allegations about the same man. The woman spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of repercussions. Her identity is known to Insider.

Ana Avendaño, United Way's former vice president for labor participation, filed an EEOC complaint obtained by Insider saying she had been silenced by United Way 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 alleged in the complaint, were being harassed and groped by multiple labor leaders. She was fired, according to HuffPost.

Former employees previously told Insider men who engaged in sexist behavior were rewarded in the form of promotions and praise and that male employees frequently made misogynistic and inappropriate remarks to and about women.

For example, one woman said a male executive told her, "We could promote you, but you need to stop having babies."

In response to Insider's request for comment on the allegations in December, the organization'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."

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."

But the three women who filed complaints with the EEOC now say they don't believe it was a legitimate investigation.

"The 'independent investigation,' conducted by a law firm hired by United Way, did not contact me, and as far as I know, did not contact other women who have filed EEOC complaints, which are submitted under penalty of perjury," Bowman said in a statement to

Insider. "This was not a thorough, fair, or reliable investigation – and only serves to protect bad actors, discourage women from coming forward, while attempting to absolve United Way's leadership for their years-long failure to address system problems."

Both Avendaño and the other woman also confirmed to Insider they were not contacted by anyone from either United Way Worldwide or Proskauer Rose LLP, the law firm hired to carry out the investigation.

"I was contacted by nobody," the woman who spoke anonymously said.

"United Way, they can say all they want about this being an independent investigation. Proskauer Rose, they were bankrolled by UWW," she added. "They have substantial financial incentive and reputational incentive to get a scot-free report back."

Merrick Rossein, an employment-law consultant and professor at the CUNY School of Law, said it's common for organizations and corporations to make mistakes hiring third-party investigators. Organizations, for example, may hire third-party investigators that have financial incentives to reveal the results most favorable to the organizations that pay them.

"It's common today and problematic that institutions and employers do not get independent investigators to do the investigation," Rossein said. "So therefore, an investigation might be tailor-made to what the leadership of the organization or company wants it to be. So it's really important to have an independent, impartial investigator."

The results page for the investigation said the firm reached out twice to all current United Way Worldwide employees for participation and received only 20 responses. There was no mention that former employees who made the complaints had been contacted.

Rossein said workplace investigations that do not contact complainants generally have little merit and are "suspicious."

"If the people who made the complaints have not been interviewed by this third party, then you can say there was no real investigation," Rossein said.

United Way "paid a firm to get what they needed. It was not thorough, it was not fair, it was not reliable, it was not balanced, it was not unbiased," the woman who filed an EEOC complaint and spoke anonymously said.

"The only employees who would have any visibility into this would be basically the perpetrators and those that were party to all of this misconduct," she added. "So whomever they spoke with there that was not party to this situation was providing feedback that was

all conjecture as far as I'm concerned. It was a highly flawed study and analysis as far as I'm concerned."

The page outlining the investigation results did note that the third-party investigator recommended changes "to strengthen our policies, practices, and procedures, including those relating to management and other training and reporting and investigating complaints."

But it did not identify the specific changes that were recommended.

There will be a "culture task force" created later this month in response to the investigation.

"The Task Force will examine several elements of UWW culture including engagement, professional development, accountability, transparency, and mission and purpose," the results page said. "We are confident that by holistically examining our current culture, we can develop a blueprint for better realizing inclusivity, collaboration, and mutual respect."

United Way did not immediately respond to a request for comment asking whether the third-party interviewed the women who filed the complaints and for more details on the specific changes recommended. Proskauer Rose also did not respond to Insider's request for comment for this story.