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Amy Powell Lawyers Up for Gender Bias Claim Over Paramount Firing



Paul Archuleta/FilmMagic

Amy Powell

"The fact that they pushed her out the door after a spurious two-day 'investigation' raises serious questions about their real motives," says a lawyer for the ousted Paramount TV chief, who was fired after allegedly making racially insensitive comments on a conference call.

When Amy Powell returned to her Paramount office from vacation earlier this month, she was met by lawyers for the studio ready to interrogate her about a conference call she had participated in while traveling. A few days later, Powell, a 14-year Paramount executive and head of its TV division, was abruptly terminated and asked to leave the studio lot immediately.

Now, a week after her firing and another high-profile dismissal at Disney have sparked a debate over offensive speech in Hollywood, Powell has enlisted her own legal firepower and is claiming that the termination was primarily motivated by gender bias on the part of Paramount under CEO Jim Gianopulos.

"Paramount's ready-fire-aim strategy has nothing to do with promoting diversity, fostering conversations in and out of the creative process, or Amy Powell's actual conduct, which has always been impeccable," her attorney Bryan Freedman tells *The Hollywood Reporter*. "In Amy's 14 years at Paramount, the last five building Paramount Television from scratch, there has never been a question about her sensitivity, inclusivity, or treatment of others. The fact that they pushed her out the door after a spurious two-day 'investigation' raises serious questions about their real motives."

Gianopulos announced Powell's departure in [an internal memo](#) last Thursday, citing "concerns about comments" made by Powell in a creative conference call about the planned TV reboot of *First Wives Club* focusing on black women. Powell's comments are said to have been racially insensitive, including references to African-American females being "angry" over black men dating white women and black men having "mommy issues" because they are raised by "single mothers." Powell has denied making offensive remarks, but Paramount sources say the studio corroborated the comments via several witnesses and decided to terminate Powell when she refused to admit she made them.

Powell's termination — along with Disney severing ties with *Guardians of the Galaxy 3* director James Gunn over years-old offensive tweets about rape and incest — have sparked an industry-wide debate over whether Hollywood's "anything goes" culture may be a thing of the past in an era of #MeToo and increased sensitivities.

Freedman, who is representing Powell with litigator Shawn Holley, says he is looking into potential claims of wrongful termination and defamation against Paramount, with an eye toward other top female executives let go under Gianopulos' 16-month tenure at the studio. He alleges the official reason for Powell's firing was pretextual, as he argued it was for Megan Colligan, another Freedman client and Paramount's former head of marketing and distribution, who exited in November and alleged gender bias. (Colligan never sued but pursued a legal claim against the studio, which was recently settled, according to sources.)

"Notably, this is not the first time the Gianopulos regime at Paramount has pushed out a highly regarded female executive under questionable circumstances," Freedman says.

In response, a spokesperson for Paramount says in a statement: "It's unfortunate that Mr. Freedman has opted to employ a baseless gender bias argument during a time when real, bona fide claims of that nature are being addressed throughout our industry. While we never take the decision to terminate employment lightly, we are confident in our decision with respect to Ms. Powell."

Powell had a long career at Paramount. Five years ago, she helped relaunch Paramount TV and has delivered hits including Netflix's *13 Reasons Why* and TNT's *The Alienist*, and was once in consideration for a high-level job at Amazon Studios under its former leader Roy Price.

Bob Bakish, CEO of Paramount parent company Viacom, has repeatedly singled out Powell's division as a bright spot at the studio. "With win after win, Paramount continues to gain credibility in the space," Bakish said of TV on an earnings call earlier this year.

Powell was in the midst of helping prepare Paramount's *First Wives Club* reboot when her alleged racist comments on a notes call prompted a complaint to the studio's human resources department. Powell was on vacation with her two children at the time, and when she returned last week, she was immediately asked about what she said during the call. Powell is said to have professed she didn't remember making racially charged comments, and on Thursday she was terminated with cause for being less than forthcoming and honest.

Not only does Powell deny saying anything racially insensitive, but according to a source close to her, she is prepared to rely on two eyewitnesses who will refute the claims.



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