

ELON MUSK'S FRAT BOY SEXUAL ABUSE CULTURE LEADS TO LAWSUIT!

Female engineer sues Tesla, describing a culture of 'pervasive harassment'

Exclusive: AJ Vandermeiden paints picture of a hostile work environment that promoted less-qualified men and retaliated against her for raising concerns



AJ Vandermeiden sits in her Tesla outside her family's home in San Carlos, California. 'Unless someone stands up, nothing will change.' Photograph: Ramin Talaie for the Guardian

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[Sam Levin](#) in San Carlos, California

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A female engineer at [Tesla](#) has accused Elon Musk's car company of ignoring her complaints of "pervasive harassment", paying her a lower salary than men doing the same work, promoting less qualified men over her and retaliating against her for raising concerns.

The allegations of AJ Vandermeiden, who still works at the celebrated electric car manufacturer, paint a picture of a hostile work environment dominated by men where inappropriate sexual behavior is tolerated and women face numerous barriers to advance their careers.

Uber launches 'urgent investigation' into sexual harassment claims

Vandermeiden, 33, shared her story with the Guardian at a time when Silicon Valley [is reeling](#) from the explosive allegations of former Uber engineer Susan Fowler. In a viral [blogpost](#), she alleged that management and HR dismissed her [complaints about documented sexual harassment](#) and sexism, protected a repeat offender because he was a “high performer” and suggested that women in the company were not as skilled as men.

Offering a rare public account of discrimination from a tech worker who remains employed at her company, Vandermeiden said her dedication to Tesla motivated her to advocate for fair treatment and reforms – despite the serious risks she knows she faces for going public.

“Until somebody stands up, nothing is going to change,” she said in a recent interview, her first comments about a discrimination lawsuit she filed last year. “I’m an advocate of Tesla. I really do believe they are doing great things. That said, I can’t turn a blind eye if there’s something fundamentally wrong going on.”

Vandermeiden began at Tesla in 2013 and was eventually promoted to a manufacturing engineering position in the general assembly department, which consisted mostly of men and where she was paid less than male engineers whose work she directly took over, according to her complaint.

It’s shocking in this day and age that this is still a fight we have to have

AJ Vandermeiden, Tesla engineer

It was common for her to be the only woman in meetings with 40 to 50 men, she said on a recent morning, seated in the living room of her family's house in San Carlos, the city where Tesla was founded, located across the bay from its current factory in Fremont.

Currently, all chief executive positions are held by men at Tesla, and out of more than 30 vice-presidents, only two are women, she added.

"It's shocking in this day and age that this is still a fight we have to have."

Vandermeiden said that when complaints arise at Tesla about workplace issues or inequality, the response is often: "'We're focused on making cars. We don't have time to deal with all this other stuff.'"

Tesla, founded in 2003, has gained international recognition for its [battery-powered vehicles](#) and "autonomous" [driving technology](#), promoted by Musk, the [ambitious entrepreneur](#) who makes headlines for bold pledges about [space travel](#), [artificial intelligence](#), [underground tunnels](#) and [driverless cars](#).

But Vandermeiden's complaint, filed last fall, alleges that there were inadequacies in the quality testing of cars, and that she raised issues about the flaws she observed, which supervisors and male engineers had missed.

Although she came up with a solution, men were granted positions above her, her lawyers wrote. She and other female engineers were denied promotions even though they were "equally or more qualified" than the men, according to the complaint.



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AJ Vandermeiden at her family's home. She says her complaints to Tesla about her treatment at work were often sidelined. Photograph: Ramin Talaie for the Guardian

At the same time, she also experienced “unwelcome and pervasive harassment by men on the factory floor including but not limited to inappropriate language, whistling, and catcalls”, the lawsuit said.

Vandermeiden recounted to the Guardian an incident in 2015 when she said a group of roughly 20 men standing on a platform above her and a female colleague began taunting as they walked past.

“They all started hooting and hollering and whistling,” she said. “That can’t happen without somebody noticing ... It’s disturbing.”

But her objections about sexual harassment and unequal pay only caused her more trouble, according to her complaint. The lawsuit alleges that after she raised concerns in the fall of 2015, management told her that in order to advance her position, she needed to achieve a performance standard in the factory that was unattainable and not expected of male engineers.

Despite positive performance evaluations, she felt she had to transfer out of general assembly to the purchasing department where she continues to work today, according to her suit.

The lawsuit said Tesla also denied her overtime pay, rest breaks and meal periods when she worked in sales, and retaliated against her for being a “whistleblower” when she raised concerns about cars “sold in a defective state”.

Some of her claims of mistreatment echo those that have recently emerged from Tesla factory workers, who allege that they have to work [long hours for low wages in unsafe conditions](#). Musk has vigorously [denied](#) those claims and [criticized](#) an effort by workers to unionize.

Tesla initially declined to respond to the Guardian’s questions about Vandermeiden’s claims, but after publication of this report, released a statement on Tuesday defending its actions and refuting her allegations.

A spokesperson said that Tesla had hired a “neutral third party” last year to investigate her accusations and that an “exhaustive review of the facts” concluded her “claims of gender discrimination, harassment, and retaliation have not been substantiated”.

The company added in its statement: “Tesla is committed to creating a positive workplace environment that is free of discrimination for all our employees.”

Therese Lawless, Vandermeiden’s lawyer, criticized the investigation, saying, “We did not believe that it was a comprehensive report ... We vehemently disagree with their finding.”

Vandermeiden’s suit said she has suffered “mental distress” and “humiliation”.

In an interview, she said it takes a toll on her knowing that her work is undervalued.

“Equal pay is something that is essentially in the back of your mind every single day,” she said. “You have all these data points showing how you’ve exceeded some of the predecessors and improved on the system. It wears on you.”

It's very difficult for women to come forward. They're concerned that their career is going to be jeopardized

Therese Lawless, lawyer for AJ Vandermeiden

Many women in similar positions choose not to speak up, Lawless said. "It's very difficult for women to come forward. They're concerned that their career is going to be hindered or jeopardized."

For those who do raise complaints, dealing with HR can be a painful struggle, added Lawless, who represented former Reddit CEO Ellen Pao in her high-profile [discrimination lawsuit](#) against venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers.

"Most of my clients come in and say, 'human resources isn't helping me. They're just protecting the company.'"

Vandermeiden recently took out a hefty loan to buy the cheapest version of the Model S Tesla car and has a reservation for the upcoming Model 3. She is hopeful her lawsuit and public comments won't end her career at a company she loves: "I think they're a revolutionary and innovative company."

But she admitted she has doubts about her future.

"Half the time when I walk into work, I wonder if my badge is going to work."

- [Tesla](#), Elon Musk, [Sexual harassment](#), [Silicon Valley](#), [California](#), [Automotive industry](#), [news](#), Tesla Motors Frat Boy Club,
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