

A Human Genome Pioneer Just Got Embroiled In A Gender Discrimination Suit

J. Craig Venter, famed genomics pioneer and cofounder of the San Diego–based Synthetic Genomics, is just one individual named in a sweeping gender discrimination lawsuit against the biotech company.

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Synthetic Genomics, a major biotech firm founded by human genome pioneer J. Craig Venter, has been hit by a gender discrimination lawsuit, after a former executive claimed that she and other female employees were routinely discriminated against while working there.

The suit, first reported by the San Diego Union-Tribune, was filed on behalf of the company's former vice president of intellectual property, Teresa Spehar, on Sept. 7 in San Diego Superior Court.

The lawsuit alleges that women at the San Diego-based company received less pay than men, were promoted less frequently, were routinely excluded from meetings, and were openly dismissed and stereotyped.

“For the few women that somehow manage to advance to a leadership role, they are constantly reminded of their subordinate position within a male-dominated company,” the suit states. “They are isolated and excluded from meetings. Then, when they are actually allowed into meetings, they are either ignored altogether, or disproportionately challenged and denigrated with gender-based stereotypes.”

The suit names company cofounder Venter, the genomics pioneer most known for his leading role in first sequencing the human genome, as one of the individuals who engaged in the discriminatory treatment, though he is not named as a defendant in the complaint.

“I passionately believe the gender discrimination claims in the lawsuit are without merit and we will vigorously defend these claims made in the lawsuit,” Synthetic Genomics CEO Oliver Fetzner said in a statement provided to BuzzFeed News. “Specific to gender diversity, across the life science industry there is a persistent gap in male and female representation. This has been an area of focus and commitment from the Synthetic Genomics board and our entire leadership team.”

Spehar's lawyer, [Josh Gruenberg](#), challenged those claims.

“Addressing gender disparity was never a priority for the company,” Gruenberg told BuzzFeed News. “It's easy for them to say now. But my client would say that that issue was never discussed among the company's executives.”

As of Wednesday, Synthetic Genomics said that it had not yet been served with the lawsuit.

The firm is a leader in “synthetic” biology, using digital data and DNA molecules to manufacture biological products like vaccines and drugs.

The suit alleges that top executives often made light of the “boys club” environment at the company. In one instance described in the suit, Venter allegedly placed his arm around the only woman present at a meeting of top executives, pulled her close to his upper body, and loudly said words to the effect of “Looks like you're the only one without a penis here!”

The woman later told Spehar that she was “mortified and humiliated,” but no concerns were ever raised by management. Instead, the woman left the company and everything “was swept under the rug,” the suit says. Spehar claimed that women employees often left the company with a “consulting agreement, which is in effect a ‘hush money’ settlement payment to guarantee silence.”

The suit notes that only 3 out of 17 senior scientists at the company are women, and women occupy none of the company's 7 chief executive slots. Spehar, who was vice president of intellectual property before she was fired in June, was the only woman at the VP level aside from the vice president of human resources.

Adequate representation of women in biotech continues to be a major problem, as women made up less than 20 of the 112 management positions at the top 10 biotech companies by 2015.

The issue also exists at the level of startups — of the 70 executive positions at the 10 companies that raised the most in venture capital funding in 2014, only 17 percent were women. Of the 45 scientific advisory board positions at these 10 companies, only 3 went to women.

Nor is academic science immune. In two lawsuits filed in July of this year against San Diego's Salk Institute for Biological Studies, three women professors alleged that they got fewer promotions, lower pay, and less research funding compared to male colleagues.

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