

# The Biggest Grammys Drama Is Unfolding Offstage. Here's What You Need to Know About Deborah Dugan's Lawsuit.

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elle.com/culture/music/a30627014/grammys-drama-deborah-dugan-neil-portnow

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2020

At the 62nd annual Grammy Awards, to be held this Sunday in Los Angeles, viewers can expect electric performances from the likes of Billie Eilish and perhaps a buzzy acceptance speech or two from Lizzo. What they might not know is that most of the major Grammys drama has already happened offstage.

The controversy extends to last year's show, which saw a dearth of female representation and the ousting of CEO Neil Portnow. This week, his replacement Deborah Dugan filed a discrimination charge against the Recording Academy days before the show is scheduled to air. Below, everything to know about the behind-the-scenes turmoil plaguing this year's Grammys.

## Recording Academy CEO Deborah Dugan has alleged a "boys club" culture and conflicts of interest at the organization.

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On January 16, the Academy of Music's most recent CEO, Dugan, was placed on administrative leave. On Tuesday, January 21, she filed a charge of discrimination with the Los Angeles office of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The document alleges that she was forced out in retaliation for raising complaints about sexual harassment, improper voting conduct, and conflicts of interest at the company's highest level.

The allegations were first formally raised in an email memo sent on December 23, 2019, to Shonda Grant, the organization's managing director, people and culture. Dugan's attorneys Douglas Wigdor and Michael J. Willemin included it in the charge against the Recording Academy. (*Billboard* has published the memo in full.)

In the memo, Dugan recounts several events that she said gave "serious pause for concern and in some instances made me feel uncomfortable and unsafe." Dugan claimed to have witnessed a number of issues before signing her contract, including news of her hiring being leaked prior to accepting the position.

Dugan also alleged a number of "egregious" conflicts of interest within the Executive Committee, including board members allegedly approving payments to themselves for hundreds of thousands of dollars to oversee Grammy events that Dugan says "do not need their oversight."

Dugan also alleges that Recording Academy general counsel Joel Katz sexually harassed her throughout her time with the organization. In May 2019, prior to the start of her tenure, she had dinner with Katz where he allegedly made comments about her appearance that made her "uneasy," including him repeatedly calling her "baby." She alleges that Dugan attempted to kiss her at the end of the evening and proceeded to make suggestive comments throughout her tenure. (Katz "categorically and emphatically" denied account, in a statement from his attorney to *Billboard*.)

The complaint also states that former CEO Neil Portnow "allegedly raped a female recording artist" after her concert at Carnegie Hall. Dugan alleges that this was "upon information and belief, the real reason his contract was not renewed." (Portnow called the statement "ludicrous and untrue" and told *The Hollywood Reporter*, "There was no basis for the allegations and once again I deny them unequivocally.") In the memo, Dugan claims that members of the executive committee knew about the sexual harassment claim but did not share it with the board.

Dugan concluded the email memo with this statement:

"In my efforts to successfully resolve the many outstanding lawsuits facing the Academy that I inherited, one of the claimants characterized her experience of our organization's leadership as "...it's a boy's club and they put their financial interest above the mission...." At the time, I didn't want to believe it, but now after 5 months of being exposed to the behavior and circumstances outlined here, I have come to suspect she is right."

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## The Academy has questioned Dugan's credibility.

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In a statement, per *The New York Times*, the Academy said:

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"It is curious that Ms. Dugan never raised these grave allegations until a week after legal claims were made against her personally by a female employee who alleged Ms. Dugan had created a 'toxic and intolerable' work environment and engaged in "abusive and bullying conduct."

The Academy's statement, via Deadline, went on to allege that when Dugan did bring concerns to HR, she instructed the department "not to take any action." The organization says they "immediately launched independent investigations" to review both Dugan's alleged misconduct and her own allegations, which remain ongoing. Next, the statement claims that Dugan reportedly requested a \$22 million settlement from the Academy, which

Dugan called "flat out false" in her complaint. The Academy's statement concluded, "We regret that music's biggest night is being stolen from them by Ms. Dugan's actions and we are working to resolve the matter as quickly as possible."

Two sources told Billboard that the Academy originally countered Dugan's alleged \$22 million request with a multi-million dollar offer that was "far less" than Dugan's original ask. However, the Recording Academy would not confirm the counter offer but said in a letter to the Academy's membership on January 20 that Dugan's attorney "informed the Executive Committee that if Ms. Dugan was paid millions of dollars, she would 'withdraw' her allegations and resign from her role as CEO." (Per Deadline, Dugan's attorneys denied those claims, stating, "on the morning of the day she was put on leave, the Academy offered Ms. Dugan millions of dollars to drop all of this and leave the Academy. The Board Chair demanded an answer within the hour. When Ms. Dugan refused to accept and walk away, she was put on leave.")

On January 22, the women of the Recording Academy executive committee released a statement denying the "boys club" atmosphere and affirming their willingness to cooperate with all investigations and "address all concerns, allegations and accusations with facts in hand." Variety has their full statement.

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## Why was Dugan suspended in the first place?

Dugan's January 16 suspension came three weeks after her email was sent to Grant. She was placed on administrative leave by the Academy's board of directors following a misconduct complaint that alleges workplace bullying. It was filed by a senior female staffer identified as Claudine Little, Portnow's former executive assistant. In a January 17 statement, Dugan's attorney Bryan Freedman foreshadowed her bombshell memo. "When our ability to speak is not restrained by a 28-page contract and legal threats, we will expose what happens when you 'step up' at the Recording Academy, a public nonprofit," he said in a statement, per Billboard.

Harvey Mason, Jr. has been named interim president and CEO of the Recording Academy, which has hired two independent third party investigators to address the allegations, and they are expected to conclude in early spring, according to Billboard.

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## What led to Dugan's hiring and Portnow's exit?

Dugan was hired in May 2019 as the first-ever female CEO of the Recording Academy. She officially became president in August, replacing Portnow after his 17-year tenure. According to Billboard's sources, Dugan's initial deal was for three years with an annual salary of slightly less than \$1 million, plus bonuses. Dugan alleges in her complaint that the organization asked her to hire Dugan as a consultant for \$750,000, a request she reportedly

denied.

Portnow's exit came in 2018 after only one woman was presented with a solo Grammy during January's telecast. When asked about that stat backstage, he suggested women in the music industry should "step up" if they wanted to receive Grammy recognition. While he claimed the comment had been taken out of context, several music artists including Pink, Katy Perry, and Halsey called out Portnow's comments. He stepped down in July 2019.

"When I had the honor of being selected to lead this great organization in 2002, I vowed that on my watch, for the first time in our history, we would have a thoughtful, well-planned, and collegial transition," Portnow said in a statement at the time, via NPR. "With a little more than a year remaining on my current contract, I've decided that this is an appropriate time to deliver on that promise."

The Academy hired Tina Tchen, Michelle Obama's former chief of staff and co-founder of Time's Up, to lead a diversity and inclusion task force in March 2018.

[pic.twitter.com/BI861sjSZ4](https://pic.twitter.com/BI861sjSZ4)

— P!nk (@Pink) January 29, 2018

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## Does this mean anything for this year's Grammy Awards?

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While it's hard to say how the controversy will be addressed during Sunday's telecast (if at all), Dugan's complaint has already marred the organization's voting credibility. In the charge of discrimination, Dugan alleges that the Grammy voting process is "ripe with corruption." This alleged manipulation includes certain songs or albums receiving nominations "when the producer of the Grammys [Ken Ehrlich] wants a particular song performed during the show." (Ehrlich, who will retire after this year's ceremony, has not spoken publicly about the allegations.)

Dugan's complaint also alleges, "It is not unusual for artists who have relationships with Board members and who ranked at the bottom of the initial 20-artist list to end up receiving nominations." She claims that 30 of this year's Grammy nominees were added by the committees despite not making the cut during Academy voting. Specifically, Dugan alleges that one of this year's Song of the Year nominees was voted 18th in the category but was able to secure a nomination because the individual personally served on that category's nominating committee.

On Saturday, The Hollywood Reporter reported that Champagne brand Billecart-Salmon was pulling sponsorship from the ceremony in solidarity with Dugan. Celebrities including Megyn Kelly, Gabrielle Union, and Sheryl Crow have also tweeted support for her.

Coulda sworn this is the same board that told women to "step up" Clearly what they really meant was stand down, turn a blind eye to problems, or be fired. [#DeborahDugan](#) truly stepped up & tried to make necessary changes & was shown the door. Been there, done that, got fired too. <https://t.co/xwm3qUln3x>

— Gabrielle Union (@itsgabrielleu) [January 18, 2020](#)

What in the world!?! Deb Dugan is a fantastic and brilliant woman. [#WomenSteppingUp](#) [#StepUp](#)<https://t.co/3UpVDst3v>

— Sheryl Crow (@SherylCrow) [January 17, 2020](#)

So Deborah Dugan files an HR complaint vs Grammys org - where she was CEO - and suddenly gets fired for "bullying?" Now she can't speak bc a PUBLIC NON-PROFIT is muzzling her? Ummm - no. [#deborahdugan](#) [#thisisehathappenswhenwomenstepup](#) [#grammysstepup](#) <https://t.co/CmtAQuakjl>

— Megyn Kelly (@megynkelly) [January 18, 2020](#)

*Rolling Stone* music business editor Amy X. Wang told [CBS News](#), "You can bet that it's going to cast a big shadow over the recording academy for days, if not weeks to come."