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

BY SAVANNAH WALSH JAN 23, 2020

KEVORK DJANSEZIAN + GETTY IMAGES

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.

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.)

Deborah Dugan at the Grammy nominations press conference in November 2019.

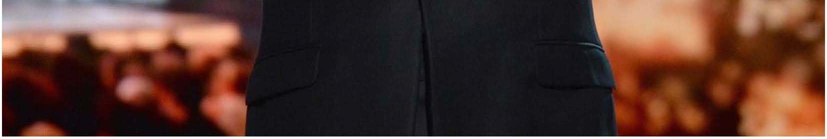
BRYAN BEDDER + GETTY IMAGES

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.



Neil Portnow at the 2018 Grammys.

MICHAEL KOVAC + GETTY IMAGES

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."

On January 23, the Recording Academy Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion, chaired by Time's Up president and CEO Tina Chen, addressed Dugan's complaint. The statement, which *Billboard* has in full, begins: "As representatives from across the music community serving on the Recording Academy Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion, we want to speak in our own voice about our shock and dismay at the allegations surrounding the Recording Academy and its leadership that surfaced this week."

The statement urges the Academy's Board of Trustees to immediately enact "real reform, take concrete steps to implement all of the Task Force reforms, and transparently and regularly report on their progress—including transparently reporting on the pending investigations they have announced are underway."

The Academy has questioned Dugan's credibility.

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

> "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.

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*.

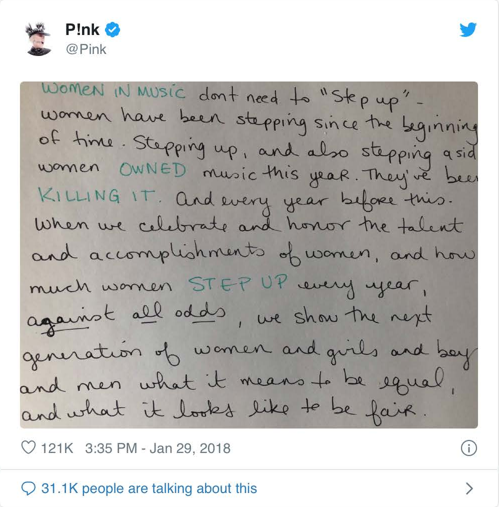
What led to Dugan's hiring and Portnow's exit?

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 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.



P!nk
@Pink

WOMEN IN MUSIC dont need to "Step up" -
women have been stepping since the beginnin
of time. Stepping up, and also stepping asid
women OWNED music this year. They've bee
KILLING IT. And every year before this.
When we celebrate and honor the talent
and accomplishments of women, and how
much women STEP UP every year,
against all odds, we show the next
generation of women and girls and boy
and men what it means to be equal,
and what it looks like to be fair.

♡ 121K 3:35 PM - Jan 29, 2018

31.1K people are talking about this

The interim Academy president has vowed to follow new initiatives developed with the Diversity Task Force.

On Sunday, January 26, the Academy's Interim CEO, Harvey Mason Jr., addressed the controversy and outlined a plan to address the Academy's diversity issues in a letter to its members. In the statement, Mason acknowledged, "It's been a challenging week for our Academy family," adding, "I've heard from many of you who feel betrayed and hurt by the untruths being spread about our motives and actions, the integrity of our process and the artists who've rightfully earned their GRAMMY Nominations, and the reminders of the hard truths we do have to face as a community."

He outlined five initiatives that the Academy would be prioritizing moving forward:

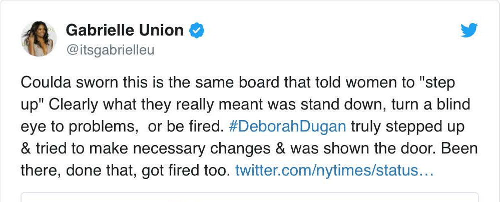
1. The Academy will hire a dedicated Diversity & Inclusion Officer within the next 90 days.
2. The Academy will establish a fellowship, funded by the Academy, that will be responsible for independent review and reporting of the progress of the Academy's Diversity & Inclusion efforts. This will be in place within 120 days.
3. The Academy will create a fund to be distributed annually to different "women in music" organizations that will be managed by the D&I Officer. This will go into effect immediately.
4. The Academy will recommit to meeting all 18 of the Task Force Recommendations as outlined in the full report and in a manner that will endure, with the caveat that we will have a deeper exploration, along with the Task Force into voting processes for the GRAMMYS.
5. The Academy is committing to meet with the Task Force to review progress on these as well as the rest of their eighteen initiatives. This first meeting will happen in 45 days. There will be subsequent follow ups to review progress.

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

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.



Gabrielle Union
@itsgabrielleu

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. twitter.com/nytimes/status…

The New York Times @nytimes
The chief executive of the Recording Academy, Deborah Dugan, was removed less than 3 weeks after she filed a memo to its head of HR about concerns over voting irregularities and financial mismanagement nyti.ms/2G10Ckw

♡ 3,087 11:26 AM - Jan 18, 2020

655 people are talking about this

Sheryl Crow
@SherylCrow

What in the world!?! Deb Dugan is a fantastic and brilliant woman. #WomenSteppingUp #StepUpbillboard.com/articles/news/…

Deborah Dugan Placed on Administrative Leave as Recording…
Deborah Dugan, who took over as Recording Academy president/CEO on Aug. 1, has been placed on administrative leave
billboard.com

♡ 108 1:30 PM - Jan 17, 2020

26 people are talking about this

Megyn Kelly
@megynkelly

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 pagesix.com/2020/01/17/gra…

Grammy insiders say Deborah Dugan ousted over bombshell …
“Is the Recording Academy trying to shut up people who want to speak about their experience?"
pagesix.com

♡ 330 11:45 AM - Jan 18, 2020

104 people are talking about this

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."

This post will be updated.