

Sexual Assault Survivors Charge NYPD With Gender Bias in Treatment of Complaints

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Alison Turkos, right, speaks on Thursday at a news conference to announce a lawsuit against the New York City Police Department alleging discriminatory treatment of women who report sexual assaults. Jennifer Welch Demski, left, is also a plaintiff in the suit and the women are represented by attorney Mariann Meier Wang of Cuti Hecker Wang. (Photo: Andrew Denney/NYLJ)

Two survivors of sexual assault have alleged in a [lawsuit](#) filed against the New York City Police Department that they were made to suffer again when they came forward to report the crimes, enduring discriminatory treatment from officers and investigations that went nowhere.

The two women, plaintiffs listed on an amended complaint filed on Thursday in Manhattan Supreme

Court, say that the mistreatment they suffered when trying to bring their attackers to justice is part of a larger problem within the department: a male-dominated culture in which officers are not properly trained to work with sexual assault victims and a lack of adequate support for a dedicated unit formed to handle their cases, the Special Victims Division (SVD).

“For years, sexual assault victims have been met with disdain, disbelief and disrespect by the NYPD officers and detectives who took their reports,” said Mariann Meier Wang of Cuti Hecker Wang, who represents the two survivors, in a press conference on Thursday at her law firm in Lower Manhattan.

Wang’s clients are suing the department under the New York City Human Rights Law, which could give the plaintiffs broad injunctive relief to push for changes within the department.

The SVD, which was created in 2003, has also been under scrutiny by the city’s Department of Investigation, which released a report in March in which it concluded that the SVD has gone understaffed and underfunded for almost a decade, which has led to investigations into assaults not being conducted properly.

Because of the understaffing, the department reported, the NYPD prioritized “stranger rapes” and other high-profile cases while “acquaintance rapes”

and other sex crimes has received less attention and are often handled by local precinct houses rather than the SVD.

Jennifer Welch Demski, one of the plaintiffs in the suit, said at the news conference that when she reported a 2015 assault by a romantic partner that occurred while she was sleeping to officers in a Brooklyn precinct house, a male sergeant told her it wasn't a rape because she didn't fight back and that he frequently has sex with his wife while she sleeps.

Welch Demski was sent away from the precinct house with a report that described her reported assault as a "dispute," according to court papers, not a sex crime.

In response to a request for the NYPD to comment on the suit, the department released a statement from Det. Sophia Mason in which she said that, in the months since the DOI published its report, the NYPD has made "major" improvements to the SVD to give it a more victim-centric approach, including a leadership change, facility improvements and deepened training.

"The NYPD is committed to doing anything and everything to ensure survivors feel the safety and support needed to come forward and help the NYPD bring them the justice they deserve," Mason said.

Alison Turkos, the other plaintiff in the case, choked

back tears at the news conference as she described her October 2017 assault by a driver she hailed through the ride-hailing service Lyft, who kidnapped her at gunpoint. Taking her case to the NYPD, she said, was like “ simply entering another chapter of that trauma.”

Turkos said officers treated her with “callous disregard,” including an SVD detective investigating the case who, Turkos alleges, barely contacted her for several months after her attack.

According to the amended complaint, the NYPD made missteps in handling Turkos’ case. Six months after her attack, with the investigation still pending, Turkos filed a complaint with the department’s Internal Affairs Bureau, which conducted its own investigation and found that the SVD detective had neglected to ask for contact information for two individuals who were with Turkos when she first entered the car.

Turkos’ case was turned over to the FBI because of the kidnapping element and the fact that her attacker took her to New Jersey, and she says the feds told her that the NYPD failed to obtain video evidence at the beginning of the case and that it botched questioning the driver.

Lyft has been accused of no wrongdoing in the survivor's lawsuit against the NYPD.

“Our job is not to hold the NYPD accountable. It is our jobs, as victims, to heal,” Turkos said.