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When an All-Female Retreat Becomes a Legal Risk: The EEOC's Coca-Cola Lawsuit

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Employers often host events and programs designed to support particular groups of employees. A recent Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (“EEOC”) lawsuit is a reminder that limiting such an event to one gender, even a women-only program meant to promote inclusion, can be challenged as unlawful discrimination.

In February 2026, the EEOC sued Coca-Cola Beverages Northeast, Inc. in federal court in New Hampshire for an alleged violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. At issue is a two-day networking retreat held in September 2024 that, according to the EEOC, was open only to female employees. Roughly 250 women attended for a program of speakers, team-building, and recreational activities. The agency alleges the company excused attendees from their regular duties while continuing to pay their wages and covered the cost of lodging and meals. A male employee who was not invited filed a charge, and after conciliation failed, the EEOC filed suit on behalf of him and a class of similarly excluded male employees.

The EEOC's theory is that access to a paid, work-time networking event is a benefit of employment, and providing it to one sex but not the other amounts to sex discrimination. Importantly, Title VII protects all employees regardless of group, and the Supreme Court confirmed in *Ames v. Ohio Department of Youth Services* (2025) that majority-group employees face no higher burden in proving a discrimination claim. The allegations remain to be tested in court, but the message to employers is clear: single-gender programming is on the EEOC's radar.

Takeaway

A program intended to support one group can carry legal risk when it provides a tangible employment benefit such as paid time without use of vacation days, access to leadership, or company-funded travel that is unavailable to others. Employers should review how their retreats, networking events, and affinity groups are structured, with attention to whether participation is restricted by a protected characteristic and whether comparable opportunities exist for all employees.

[The Employment Law Team](#) at Wilentz is available to assist with the review of these programs and policies.

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