50 Women Accuse Tech Giant Salesforce of 'Facilitating' Their Sex Trafficking and Prostitution

'Jane Does' accuse the customer relations management giant of helping the notorious website Backpage build sex trafficking brand and manage database of pimps and johns.

Barbie Latza Nadeau

Fifty 'Jane Does' have filed a lawsuit asking for unspecified damages against tech giant Salesforce, accusing the customer relations management (CRM) company of "sex trafficking, negligence and conspiracy" for creating the strategy that helped the notorious website Backpage build its brand.

Backpage shuttered its classified ad site last year after pleading guilty to "knowingly facilitating prostitution," according to a Justice Department press release at the time.

The new lawsuit, seen by the Daily Beast, was filed this week in San Francisco. It alleges that Salesforce, under the guidance of CEO Marc Benioff, engaged in nefarious activities while claiming to be fighting trafficking. "Behind the scenes ... Salesforce kept taking Backpage's money and supporting it with the CRM database of pimps, johns, and traffickers that Backpage needed to operate."

The 50 women, whose identities are being kept secret, are from across the United States including Sacramento, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Pittsburg, Milwaukee, Kansas City, Fresno, Seattle, Anchorage, Phoenix, Chicago, New Orleans, Bangor, Minneapolis, Staten Island and Jacksonville.

They allege that they were kept in sexual slavery by pimps who used Backpage ads, which were managed by Salesforce cloud technology, to sell them against their will. "Salesforce knew the scourge of sex trafficking because it sought publicity for trying to stop it. But at the same time, this publicly traded company was, in actuality, among the vilest of rogue companies, concerned only with their bottom line," the suit alleges. "And human beings—many more than just these 50—were raped and abused because of it."

"The Jane Does were forced, coerced, and made victims of sex trafficking by means of force, fear, fraud, deceit, coercion, violence, duress, menace, or threat of unlawful injury to themselves and others, including family members," the lawsuit claims. "Salesforce committed acts at issue with malice, oppression, fraud, and duress."

Salesforce denies the claims, issuing a statement on Tuesday: "We are deeply committed to the ethical and humane use of our products and take these allegations seriously."

The Jane Does claim that Backpage knew well "how to make millions of dollars trafficking victims and promoting prostitution," but that it lacked the ability to build its brand online through marketing and advertising.

"Backpage needed operational support through a customer relationship management ("CRM") to help maximize not only customer acquisition and retention, but marketing strategies to those customers as well." Salesforce, they allege, stepped in to provide those services.

The suit claims that even when Backpage faced public outcry over allegations of abetting sex trafficking through its classified ads, "Salesforce stepped in at the same time to help Backpage survive and even grow," the suit alleges. "In public, including on Twitter, Salesforce boasted about fighting human trafficking using its data tools."

They make the additional claim that Salesforce engaged in an active campaign against human trafficking. The suit refers to a number of tweets and social media posts about working to stop it including one in September 2013 in which Salesforce tweeted "Fighting human trafficking with big data," which the lawsuit alleges is hypocritical.

"Behind closed doors, Salesforce's data tools were actually providing the backbone of Backpage's exponential growth." the lawsuit state. "With Salesforce's guidance, Backpage was able to use Salesforce's tools to market to new "users"—that is, pimps, johns, and traffickers—on three continents."

Related in U.S. News

Sex Workers Crash Protest Against Decriminalization Bill

Armed Men Moved Sex-Trafficking Victims in Robert Kraft Case

Epstein, Dershowitz, and Pals Accused of Trafficking Girls

Salesforce is a cloud-based software strategy firm based in San Francisco. It specializes in bespoke customer management solutions for online companies. The company, which is consistently on Forbe's innovation lists, was founded by Oracle executive Marc Benioff in 1999. It has an annual revenue of nearly $10.5 billion according to the company website.

The women, who are asking for unspecified damages, accuse Salesforce of actually managing marketing campaigns to traffickers and pimps for Backpage and keeping their

data, which would include the sale of women for sex, in their cloud storage system for easy access.

The grocery list of claims includes allegations that Salesforce was engaged in "gathering and managing information from Backpage's traffickers' and pimps' public social media activity, including but not limited to their likes and dislikes" and "providing and managing Backpage's trafficker and pimp database as well as tracking and collecting trafficker and john data across multiple platforms including phone, email, and social media." The suit claims that rather than reporting Backpage to authorities, they instead bolstered its business at the expense of the trafficking victims.

"Sex trafficking previously took place (and continues to through the aid of online advertising) on the streets, casinos, truck stops, and in other physical locations," the suit explains. "Now, most sex trafficking, including the trafficking of the Jane Does, is facilitated online."

The suit demands that Salesforce take on some of the financial burden of helping victims of trafficking. "It should not be our tax dollars, charities, and churches that carry the burden of the catastrophic harms and losses to sex trafficking survivors," the lawsuit claims. "That responsibility should fall to companies like Salesforce, that have facilitated and profited from sex trafficking. Salesforce knew the scourge of sex trafficking because it sought publicity for trying to stop it."