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Les Moonves and CBS face allegations of sexual misconduct

Six women accuse the C.E.O. of harassment and intimidation, and dozens more describe abuse at his company.

For more than twenty years, Leslie Moonves has been one of the most powerful media executives in America. As the chairman and C.E.O. of CBS Corporation, he oversees shows ranging from “60 Minutes” to “The Big Bang Theory.” His portfolio includes the premium cable channel Showtime, the publishing house Simon & Schuster, and a streaming service, CBS All Access. Moonves, who is sixty-eight, has a reputation for canny hiring and project selection. The Wall Street Journal recently called him a “TV programming wizard”; the Hollywood Reporter dubbed him a “Wall Street Hero.” In the tumultuous field of network television, he has enjoyed rare longevity as a leader. Last year, according to filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission, he earned nearly seventy million dollars, making him one of the highest-paid corporate executives in the world.

In recent months, Moonves has become a prominent voice in Hollywood’s #MeToo movement. In December, he helped found the Commission on Eliminating Sexual Harassment and Advancing Equality in the Workplace, which is chaired by Anita Hill. “It’s a watershed moment,” Moonves said at a conference in November. “I think it’s important that a company’s culture will not allow for this. And that’s the thing that’s far-reaching. There’s a lot we’re learning. There’s a lot we didn’t know.” But Moonves’s private actions belie his public statements. Six women who had professional dealings with him told me that, between the nineteen-eighties and the late aughts, Moonves sexually harassed them. Four described forcible touching or kissing during business meetings, in what they said appeared to be a practiced routine. Two told me that Moonves physically intimidated them or threatened to derail their careers. All said that he became cold or hostile after they rejected his advances, and that they believed their careers suffered as a result. “What happened to me was a sexual assault, and then I was fired for not participating,” the actress and writer Illeana Douglas told me. All the women said they still feared that speaking out would lead to retaliation from Moonves, who is known in the industry for his ability to make or break careers. “He has gotten away with it for decades,” the writer Janet Jones, who alleges that she had to shove Moonves off her after he forcibly kissed her at a work meeting, told me. “And it’s just not O.K.”

Thirty current and former employees of CBS

told me that such behavior extended from Moonves to important parts of the corporation, including CBS News and “60 Minutes,” one of the network’s most esteemed programs. During Moonves’s tenure, men at CBS News who were accused of sexual misconduct were promoted, even as the company paid settlements to women with complaints. It isn’t clear whether Moonves himself knew of the allegations, but he has a reputation for being closely involved in management decisions across the network. Some of the allegations, such as those against the former anchor Charlie Rose, as reported by the Washington Post, have already become public. Other claims are being reported here for the first time. Nineteen current and former employees told me that Jeff Fager, the former chairman of CBS News and the current executive producer of “60 Minutes,” allowed harassment in the division. “It’s top down, this culture of older men who have all this power and you are nothing,” one veteran producer told me. “The company is shielding lots of bad behavior.”

In a statement, Moonves said, “Throughout my time at CBS, we have promoted a culture of respect and opportunity for all employees, and have consistently found success elevating women to top executive positions across our company. I recognize that there were times decades ago when I may have made some women uncomfortable by making advances. Those were mistakes, and I regret them immensely. But I always understood and respected—and abided by the principle—that ‘no’ means ‘no,’ and I have never misused my position to harm or hinder anyone’s career. This is a time when we all are appropriately focused on how we help improve our society, and we at CBS are committed to being part of the solution.” According to CBS, there have been no misconduct claims and no settlements against Moonves during his twenty-four years at the network. A statement from the company said, “CBS is very mindful of all workplace issues and takes each report of misconduct very seriously. We do not believe, however, that the picture of our company created in The New Yorker represents a larger organization that does its best to treat its tens of thousands of employees with dignity and respect. We are seeing vigorous discourse in our country about equality, inclusion, and safety in the workplace, and CBS is committed to being part of the solution to those important issues.” The allegations are surfacing at a time when CBS is engaged in an increasingly acrimonious



fight with its former parent company, Viacom, which acquired CBS in 1999 and spun it off as a separate entity seven years later. A holding company founded by the mogul Sumner Redstone still owns a majority stake in both Viacom and CBS, and Redstone’s daughter and heir, Shari Redstone, has sought to reunite the businesses. Moonves has resisted the move, and in May Redstone’s holding company and CBS filed lawsuits against each other. All of the women making allegations against Moonves began speaking to me before the current lawsuits, in independent interviews carried out during the past eight months. All said that they were not motivated by any allegiance in the corporate battle. But several felt that this was an opportunity to examine a workplace culture that many of the women in this story described as toxic.

CBS is not the only network to face complaints of sexual harassment in recent years. In November, Matt Lauer, a co-host of “Today,” on NBC, was fired after being accused of sexual misconduct. Roger Ailes, the chairman and C.E.O. of Fox News, and the Fox anchor Bill O’Reilly both resigned after allegations were made against them. The actions of Ailes and O’Reilly have resulted in at least sixty-five million dollars in sexual-harassment settlements. Experts told me that addressing patterns of

harassment at a company as large as CBS generally depends on reform at the highest levels. “This sort of conduct is tied to over-all climate and oftentimes to how women are seen or valued within an entire organization,” Fatima Goss Graves, the president and C.E.O. of the National Women’s Law Center, said. “And there’s no question that the head of the organization sets the tone for the entire organization.” For the women who have made claims against Les Moonves, his public stance as a supporter of the #MeToo movement and his role in the Commission on Eliminating Sexual Harassment and Advancing Equality in the Workplace have been unnerving. Janet Jones told me that, when she heard that he was on the commission, “I thought, Oh, for God’s sake, he has no shame.” The commission is made up of, and funded by, industry leaders, and its members are not vetted. Illeana Douglas knew people who were associated with the commission, and considered telling them her story, until she saw that Moonves was also a member. “I don’t think that the fox should be guarding the henhouse,” she said.

• Ronan Farrow is a contributing writer to *The New Yorker* and the author of the book “War on Peace: The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Influence.” His reporting for *The New Yorker* won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for public service.