

**TRANSCRIPT OF VANESSA GILLES' SPEECH FROM MARCH 20, 2019,  
AT THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE 63RD COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

Good morning, and once again thank you to all the UN delegations for welcoming us to the 63rd Commission on the Status of Women. We are honored to be a part of an event dedicated to addressing the topic of inequality and providing solutions for the future.

Soccer is the most popular and most played sport by children in this country and around the world.

Almost everyone in this country has the opportunity to play. In the US alone, there are approximately 1 and a half million girls under the age of 19 playing soccer. Of those girls, around 40 thousand will go on to play soccer and receive a college education at one of the fourteen hundred collegiate teams in the US. This university infrastructure is probably the best in the world, and provides both men and women with unparalleled opportunity in soccer. However, in women's soccer, we are here to address what comes next.

My name is Vanessa Gilles, I started practicing this sport when I was 15 in high school in Canada. I was lucky enough to receive a full scholarship offer from the University of Cincinnati for four years. During my studies I won a championship, several individual accolades as one of the best players in the country, and most importantly to me, a degree which provides me with a safety net to pursue my passion. Despite being one of the top players in college soccer, I needed to be incredibly lucky to get to where I am today.

I was lucky to find an agent and convince him to work with me.

I was lucky to find a professional club to play for. Not in the US. Not in France. But in Cyprus. A country I had no idea existed.

So I flew across the world with my bags, with very little pay, without knowing anyone or having any idea of what the future had in store for me.

I was so incredibly grateful to play professionally. That opportunity allowed me to sign my second professional contract with Bordeaux, a top team in one of the best leagues in the world. A team that is continually striving – as we can attest today – to develop the women's project and inspire the next generations to dream with us. I was never, the most talented, the most technical, the fastest, and despite my appearance, I was never the strongest either in highschool, at university or in Cyprus. But here I am. A young woman pursuing her passion as a profession.

At every step of the way during our playing careers, my teammates and I had to fight and be incredibly lucky to get to where we are today.

In American universities, male players are 700 times more likely to play professionally than women. These are the odds in a country which boasts the world's best woman's soccer team. Of the very, very few college female graduates who became professionals in the US last year, most were not even guaranteed a living wage.

If this is the level of inequality in what is regarded as the world's best environment for women's soccer, imagine what this inequality looks like in every other country.

Many of my friends and ex-teammates playing here and across the world need to support themselves with a part time job. As women across the world, and across all different professions can confirm, we face challenges and stress that most men in our fields do not.

We are the lucky ones who are fortunate enough to earn our living playing professional soccer today, but every day we think about what's next.

Only a quarter of female professional soccer players in the top five leagues in the world do not need to work a second job to make ends meet. We earn less in a year than what our male colleagues earn in a month.

So how can people call us professional athletes if we are not able to make soccer a sustainable full-time profession?

Being a professional athlete should mean that we can focus solely on being the best player we can be. At Bordeaux, my teammates and I are able to do so.

The vast majority of female soccer players cannot.

For women in this field, choosing a future in soccer is still seen as a risk. We have to choose between pursuing our passion and hope for job opportunities afterwards, or foregoing our dreams and start another career.

More important however than the issue of wage inequality is that of opportunity. Women deserve to have the same opportunities to pursue their passion – soccer or otherwise – as men do.

For example, in France alone, one of the best leagues and soccer hubs in the world this difference is still evident: Women have 12 professional teams to choose from. Men have 122.

When brands, broadcasters, or sponsors promote athletes across the globe – from tennis to basketball or in soccer – male players are judged solely on their performance. For female athletes to be marketable, we need to be “pretty”.

Until we are given the same opportunity on and off the pitch, we will have something to fight for.

Women’s soccer represents the purest form of the game: we play because we truly love football. My predecessors fought so that I could live off of soccer today.

What I hope for the future, is that more young girls around the world will be given the same opportunity based on merit and not luck. We all took a leap of faith in choosing this career path. We hope that in the near future, choosing to pursue our passion isn’t seen as a risk, but as a viable profession.

Women in sports have come a long way over the years, but the road ahead is even longer. I am proud of my teammates and all my coworkers who, despite the odds, have been able to pave their way in the sport that we love. It’s an upward climb to equality in this sport, but I hope we are one speech closer to guaranteeing that the next Mia Hamm, Serena Williams, or Camille Surdez won’t have to choose between following their passion or earning a living.

I thank the UN and the commission for this opportunity to share my story. If we are here it’s because this chamber represents a powerful outlet for change and equality. I hope that with my teammates and colleagues at Bordeaux we can set an example for others to follow.

Thank you for your time.