

Public Statement on Taking Athletes as Political Prisoners

Nation-states began using sport and athletes for diplomatic and political advantage in geopolitical struggles in the 20th century. As sport scholars we understand that all sports and especially international sports are sites of politics as well as competition and entertainment. However, as members of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, we unequivocally denounce and condemn the coerced use of athletes as political pawns in contestations between nation-states. We demand the immediate release of all athletes currently held as political prisoners. We further demand that all high-profile athletes be allowed freedom of movement and protection from coercion by their own and foreign nation-states.

As scholars of sport who engage in transnational research on the impact of sport as a social institution, we find the detainment of athletes unacceptable. It is unacceptable for the celebrity status of an athlete to be used in political conflicts in which they have no direct stakes. International athletes should feel free to participate in their sport and earn a living whether at home or abroad without fear for their safety or freedom.

The level of prestige that athletes have within global culture often obscures the fact they remain vulnerable and are often discriminated against. This is especially true for athletes that are women, athletes of color, LGBTQI, and those with invisible and visible (dis)abilities. The reality is that stark pay inequity remains between individual sports and in the context of gendered, classed, and racialized differences. When these same athletes are used as bargaining chips, we are all threatened. If world class athletes are not safe, then who is? Those of us who live on the margins as a result of being burdened by multiple systems of oppression are especially vulnerable.

Political leaders need to be held accountable for securing the release of athletes detained without clear evidence of their condition—including mental and physical health. The toll that political detainment has upon athletes is real, and it is up to those in positions of power to secure their freedom.

We are an inter-disciplinary organization of scholars committed to social justice and progressive change, we fight racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and capitalist structures that bind them all. We support the work of grassroots organizations like [Black Feminist Futures that had campaigned for the release of WNBA star Brittney Griner who had been held in a Russian penal colony](#). While Griner is one amongst many elite athletes who become embroiled against their will in geopolitical struggles, **we unequivocally support the campaign #BringBrittneyHome!** since it is unlikely that she would have been released on 8 December 2022 without it.

It is time to take a stand and continue to make noise until those who have been used as bargaining chips have been released and returned to their families.

Respectfully,

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