



Lorie Shaul/Wikimedia Commons

Brittney Griner in action in 2019

## THE UNDERWHELMING COVERAGE OF #FREEBRITNEYGRINER

Lily Kunda and Jennifer McClearen

**“Free Brittney Griner”** became the rallying cry for WNBA players and fans alike after the news of [her arrest surfaced](#) on March 5, 2022. The 31-year-old center for the Phoenix Mercury was being held in custody in Moscow, Russia, on charges of possessing cannabis oil. Griner was in Russia to play for one of their professional basketball teams during the Mercury’s offseason. By the time [The New York Times](#) first broke the news, the WNBA All-Star had already been detained for more than two weeks.

Many took to Twitter to share their outrage at the delayed media coverage. [One user shared](#), “#BrittneyGriner has been in Russian custody for almost THREE WEEKS and we’re JUST hearing about it?! ... the only reason she’s over there is because America doesn’t give af about women athletes—let alone Black AND Queer women athletes,” as #BrittneyGriner and #FreeBrittneyGriner began to trend online. The underwhelming coverage of Griner’s detention by the nation’s leading news outlets exemplifies how the lives of Black queer sportswomen continue to be devalued in the United States.

As news of her arrest broke, the WNBA [responded](#), “Brittney Griner has the WNBA’s full support,” but shared few details. The next major headline surfaced much later on July 4, when Griner’s representatives [published a handwritten note](#) from Griner to President Joe Biden. “I still have so much good to do with my freedom that you can help restore,” she wrote in the letter, pleading with him to mediate her release. Griner continued, “I miss my wife! I miss my family! I miss my teammates! It kills me to know they are suffering so much right now.” When the letter was made public, [White House representatives said](#) they were making every effort to secure her release.

The United States had acted faster and more successfully to free male celebrities in legal trouble abroad. Examples include rapper [A\\$AP Rocky](#), who was arrested in Sweden in 2019, basketball player [LiAngelo Ball](#), who was detained in China in 2017, and swimmer [Ryan Lochte](#), who was charged by Brazilian police during the 2016 Olympics. Griner, on the other hand, was sentenced to 9 years in a prison colony southeast of Moscow where inmates reportedly work [16-hour days](#).



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The White House. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

President Joe Biden meets with Cherelle Griner, after securing Brittney Griner’s release.

Despite also being ensnared in a complex web of [international relations](#), Griner’s identities as a queer, Black sportswoman are at the heart of this controversy. Racism, sexism, and homophobia all have an impact on how the media, the government, and the public view her. [News stories](#) about white women in danger receive more media attention than stories about Black women or other women of color in danger. Griner is no exception. The American press was slow to report her arrest and largely ignored the story during her detention.

Some may argue that Griner was at fault for her arrest or that she wasn’t in grave danger. But as [Patricia Hill Collins](#) demonstrates, Black women are more often portrayed as dangerous and deserving of punishment than white women. The unfair treatment of Griner is an example of how “ideological justification” is at the heart of “race, class, gender, and sexuality oppressions,” according to Hill Collins.

The prison where Griner was serving her sentence is [reportedly notorious](#) for mistreating Black and queer prisoners, but that fact failed to generate any real outrage in mainstream news or public discourse. Phoenix Mercury coach, Vanessa Nygaard agrees the lack of urgency to bring Griner home stems from her identity as a queer Black woman. “If it was LeBron, he’d be home, right? [The fact that she’s still detained is] a statement about the value of women,” [Nygaard said](#). “It’s a statement about the value of a Black person. It’s a statement about the value of a gay person.”

But LeBron James is also unlikely to face a situation like Griner’s because NBA players are not compelled to play

abroad like WNBA players. [According to NPR](#), NBA players make 44 times what WNBA players earn and as a result, almost half of WNBA players [play for foreign teams](#) during the offseason. Griner’s most recent WNBA contract guaranteed her \$221,450 for the 2021-2022 season; meanwhile, she was earning around [\\$1.5 million per year](#) playing professionally in Russia during the WNBA offseason.

There are several factors leading to these stark pay disparities that converge at the intersection of Griner’s identities. Namely, female athletes are [ignored and underrepresented](#) in mainstream sports media, which is reflected in their pay. [Jessica Luther and Kavitha Davidson](#) point out that the presumption “that women athletes deserve less attention, lower salaries, and fewer endorsement deals” is justified by sexist beliefs about women’s biological inferiority as athletes.

On December 8, 2022, the Biden administration announced that it had successfully negotiated Griner’s release. The U.S. government exchanged her freedom for that of a Russian arms dealer known as the “merchant of death,” but was unable to also free another [American citizen detained in Russia](#).

Initial reactions in conservative [news circles](#) and [Twitter feeds](#) focused on the worth of Griner’s freedom in comparison to her still detained white compatriot, as well as the perceived costs of releasing an arms dealer. Even as some media coverage celebrated Griner’s release and focused on the joy felt by her family and teammates, the continued devaluing of her life in comparison to a white male prisoner and a [defunct arms dealer](#) speaks volumes about the value of Black queer sportswomen in America. ■

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