

Flying While Trans

The T.S.A. subjects transgender passengers like me to humiliating and dehumanizing treatment.

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Flying while transgender — a term that increasingly includes not just those who are male or female but also those who identify as both or neither, like me — is undeniably improving. Last month, United Airlines [expanded its gender options](#): Passengers can select male, female, undisclosed or unspecified, and can choose the honorific “Mx.” “Fly how you identify,” the airline touted in its [feel-good tweet](#) — and American Airlines, Southwest Airlines, Delta Air Lines and Alaska Airlines quickly promised they’d make similar changes.

But it’s not actually possible to “fly as you identify” as long as the Transportation Security Administration screening process relies on the idea of binary gender. As the T.S.A.’s [own guidelines state](#), “When you enter the imaging portal, the T.S.A. agent presses a button designating a gender (male/female) based on how you present yourself” — that is, how the agent perceives you as presenting yourself. This selection triggers expectations that guide the screening process. If, for example, an agent presses the [pink “female” button](#) for someone wearing boxers, an alarm will be triggered on the scanner, because loose fabric around the crotch of a female body is considered unexpectedly gender nonconforming. A compression shirt on the chest of someone for whom an agent presses the blue “male” button can do the same.

Once gender has been chosen, the machine proceeds on expectations about anatomy. A transgender passenger who passes — who is correctly read by the T.S.A. agent as the gender the person identifies as — but who has different genitalia will trigger an alarm. Intersex people may have ambiguous genitalia that [trigger alarms](#) and require invasive pat-downs every time.

In 2015, when Shadi Petosky’s [horrific experience](#) gave rise to the hashtag [#travelingwhiletrans](#), the T.S.A. [still classified](#) the genitalia of transgender people as “anomalies.” After the outcry, they now use the new language of “alarm.” Current T.S.A. guidelines [state](#) that “agents are trained to clear the alarm, not the individual.” But when identity and body cause the alarm, what’s the distinction?

I identify as genderqueer. Last week, I had just stepped through the scanner at Boston Logan International Airport when I heard the T.S.A. agent shout, “I think we pressed the wrong button!” He had shouted so loudly, I assumed he was talking about someone else. But then he spoke again, directly to me, avoiding my gaze. “Go through again,” he said.

The long line behind me halted as I walked back into the scanner and assumed the position: arms up, legs spread. I waited, painfully aware that the other passengers were staring at me. Did they know what was happening? Did they know what the agent meant by “the button?”

My hair is clipped to a fade. My shoulders have started to thicken from barbell presses. Even without a binder, my chest is flat. I am often called “sir,” particularly in airports, particularly when I wear the men’s blazer that I have learned differs in some inscrutably minute way from all the other men’s blazers I wear, and makes people read me differently.

But I am more often called “ma’am.” I have a soft jawline and curved hips. Which button had they pressed this time? And what had then caused the agent to reclassify me, rethink me, re-sort me into the other category? The other category — when neither category actually fits?

My cisgender friends did not know that T.S.A. agents judged their bodies and presentation every time they flew. They've never had to know. But among my gender-nonconforming and transgender friends, experiences like mine are common. In 2015, [a survey of transgender passengers](#) revealed that 43 percent had negative experiences with T.S.A. screening in the previous year.

A 2017 analysis in the [American Journal of Public Health](#) estimated that there are close to one million transgender individuals nationwide. The analysis suggested what many of us in the transgender community already know: that as young people become more comfortable with trusting their own self-expression and bodies rather than a socially constructed and enforced idea of a strict binary, the number of transgender people in society will grow.

The T.S.A. must catch up. So far, it has refused to articulate why gender selection at the start of screening is necessary. More than a year has passed since the T.S.A. acting administrator for civil rights, Christine Griggs, [testified](#) before Congress that vendors had machines that could move the T.S.A. away from these binary screenings. The T.S.A. has failed to present a timeline or steps it is taking toward this, even in response to a congressional request. This past August, Representative Kathleen Rice, Democrat of New York, introduced the [Screening With Dignity Act](#), which would give the T.S.A. 180 days to report on the feasibility of adopting gender-neutral scanners. But no vote on the act has been held, and even with a Democratic majority, the composition of the House arguably makes it unlikely.

Meanwhile, passengers like me fly. When the machine had finished its second scan, I stepped out and waited. I found myself looking more closely at my fellow passengers. How would I sort them if I had to? How would they sort me? Did they think I was a man or a woman? Did anyone think I was neither and therefore actually see me?

Then I noticed the agent's expression shift. He looked as miserable and uncomfortable as I felt. I turned around. On the screen was the outline of a person, arms up, with just one little yellow box of irregularity — the “alarm.”

It was right over my crotch. I shouldn't need to tell you that the pat-down that followed was invasive and humiliating, just as I shouldn't have had to endure it.