TRANSADVOCATE

The TSA: a binary body system in practice

By Guest

Published January 3, 2016 | Updated March 31, 2026
https://www.transadvocate.com/the-tsa-a-binary-body-system-in-practice_n_15540.htm

Abstract

Traveling While Trans: The False Promise of Better Treatment By Dr. Cary Gabriel Costello Back in 2012, I wrote about the problems I regularly encountered as a trans person when going through TSA security screening at airports. Since that time, we've been promised, much has changed. The TSA has formally stated that it will not discriminate [...]

Article

Traveling While Trans: The False Promise of Better Treatment
By Dr. Cary Gabriel Costello

Back in 2012, I wrote about the problems I regularly encountered as a trans person when going through TSA security screening at airports.

Since that time, we've been promised, much has changed. The TSA has formally stated that it will not discriminate on the basis of gender identity. Passengers are to be screened based upon their gender presentation. Any pat-downs are to be conducted by TSA agents whose gender matches the passenger's presented gender, no matter what gender marker is listed on the passenger's government ID. The agents on the floor operating the body scanner now just see a body outline icon marked with any areas of "anomaly" on their screen, instead of an actual image of the details of the passenger's anatomy, so

privacy should be protected. The TSA has promised that the bad old days of trans people being harassed and humiliated by its agents are in the past, and we have reached the era of enlightenment.

That would be nice.

Unfortunately, what now happens in practice is another matter altogether. In my own experience, intrusive, frightening, and humiliating screenings continue unabated. To illustrate, I'll relate what happened to me when I flew from Milwaukee to New York a couple of weeks ago. The short version is this: I was detained for almost an hour and subjected to multiple, increasingly-invasive pat-downs, as a result of the equipment used by the TSA, along with the (lack of) training by agents in the TSA's stated trans policies. Eventually, as things escalated, even my daughter was taken aside for intensive screening, though she had set off no alarms-because an agent came to believe that she too was trans, and thus a suspicious traveler.

Let's look at how this could come to happen.

Today, body scanners are the normative screening method in U.S. airports. In the past, travelers had the right to request a physical pat-down instead of going through the scanner, but the TSA recently decided complying with such a request is at the discretion of the agent. Since simply requesting not to be scanned can be perceived as suspicious, most trans passengers will be body-scanned. So, let's look at an example of the icon image a TSA agent running a body scanner receives:

As you can see, the way the system operates is that the TSA agent pushes a pink-for-girls or blue-for-boys binary gender button when a passenger enters the body scanner. The scanner then looks for "anomalies" under the passenger's clothing-and in the process, engages in technological sex/gender policing. The image above shows what a TSA agent will see when many trans women go through a scanner: an "anomaly" in the groin area. When I go through the scanner, the red and yellow areas of "anomaly" are in my chest area, as I wear a binder. Every time I am scanned, when I look back at the display, I see my chest area outlined in colors of alarm:

The TSA says it does not discriminate on the basis of gender identity, and that travelers will be treated with respect as members of whatever gender they present themselves as. But in fact, the "Automated Target Recognition" software used by body scanners is set up to police both binary sex and cisgender bodily expectations. Bodies that vary from these expectations set off alarms and are treated as potential terrorist threats.

Once a TSA agent sees ares of red and yellow on the screen before them, the passenger must receive additional screening until the possible threat is deemed "cleared." The first step is that a public pat-down is performed right outside the scanner by a TSA agent. (That agent is supposed to be of the same gender as the traveler, but one should note that binary gender is presumed by the TSA, and there is no official TSA policy about how to handle passengers with nonbinary gender identities.)

If the initial pat-down doesn't "clear" the issue, the passenger is taken to a screening room for a more invasive investigation. This makes the initial pat-down pivotal in determining how unpleasant the process of passing through security will be for a trans traveler.

The factor that determines what will happen to trans travelers after we are marked as "anomalous" by

body scanners is largely a matter of the training and attitude of the TSA agent called over for the public pat-down that follows. If that agent understands that the alarm has been set off by our trans anatomy, and that the TSA is supposed to treat trans bodies with respect, we get a quick pat-down and are cleared to move on. The trans passenger will experience a brief flash of adrenaline when their body sets off an alarm, and anxiety as their body is publicly palpated in an area likely to be one they do not wish scrutinized, but the interval of apprehension is brief, and travel is not disrupted.

The problem is, many TSA agents have little understanding of trans people or our bodies, although they supposedly should have received appropriate training. They view our "anomalous" body scan results as suspicious, as weird, and as marking a potentially serious threat. So when their physical inspection confirms there is indeed Something There where the scanner image shows glaring red and yellow, they send us off for further, more intrusive screening.

In my personal experience, my chances of being detained for additional screening after the brief public pat-down are about 2 in 3 when flying out of my home airport in Milwaukee, but significantly lower when flying out of airports in large coastal American cities. My body and my binding practices are the same when flying away and flying home, so it's clear that local culture plays a substantial role in trans experiences with TSA screening. Levels of trans awareness and transphobia vary and this impacts not only whether we will face additional screening, but what that screening will be like.

(This is not to say that TSA agents in large coastal cities are trans-aware paragons. When my wife was flying out of San Francisco in 2014, the TSA agents did grant that since her response to the question "are you presenting as male or female" was that she a trans woman, the TSA agent who patted her down should also be a woman. But that agent spent an inordinate amount of time patting and feeling over her chest with an expression of confused suspicion. Finally, she asked my spouse what she had in there. My wife responded, "Erm, those are my breasts." The response of the agent? "How can you have breasts if you aren't wearing a bra?" My spouse stared at the agent for a bit, open-mouthed, before replying, "You're a woman-you tell me." The TSA agents conferred for a while, before deciding that while they were uncomfortable my wife's clearly trans body, the mounds on her chest were indeed breasts, and going braless does not constitute a terrorist threat. So they allowed her to proceed. But it was hardly a smooth encounter that left my wife feeling respected or validated.)

In December 2015, while flying from Milwaukee to New York with my daughter, my body scan results showed my "anomalous" chest highlighted in red and yellow as usual, and the operator of the scanner called a TSA agent over to give me a pat-down. When patting me down, the agent palpated my binder, and asked me what I was wearing under my shirt, following standard TSA procedure. I stated that it was a chest binder. This is the critical juncture-perhaps a third of the time, in Milwaukee, the agent will ask no more questions, simply complete patting down my body, and send me on my way. But more often, I'll be interrogated as to why I wear the binder, as was the case this time. My initial reply is always the simple statement that I wear it to compress my chest, but the agent usually finds this reply incomprehensible, and asks why I would need to do that. Once I explain that I do so because I am a trans man, I'm inevitably separated from my belongings and my travel companion and taken to a small room with two TSA agents for additional screening.

In 2012 I wrote about the highly uncomfortable experiences I had locked in a screening room with two or more TSA agents for inspection at the Milwaukee airport. Since then, I have been assured that the

agents have received additional training. They are supposed to be aware that the TSA considers a chest binder to be a prosthetic device, and that trans passengers should not be asked to display or remove prostheses such as binders, breast forms, or packers. I have been told that agents would no longer make me open or remove my shirt when being subjected to the additional screening procedure.

But that's just not true. Every time I am taken into the screening room for additional scrutiny, in every city where this has happened, I am asked to open, lift, or remove my shirt so that my binder can be inspected and swabbed for explosives. And every single time this happens, I get to watch the agents' faces go from puzzled confusion to uncomfortable or disgusted recognition that I have breasts under there, and that they are covered with chest hair. This never changes.

How the screening proceeds from there, however, does vary. Sometimes it is very tense. Last year, a TSA agent at a New York airport ordered me to remove my binder so it could be sent through the x-ray machine. I had to insist that a supervisor be called to confirm that I could not be required to remove my binder, and at one point during this confrontation there were four big men in the tiny room with me, which is an intimidating situation.

At least during my most recent screening, nobody asked me to take the binder off-I was only directed to untuck and lift my shirt so that the agent could reach under the shirt and swab the binder for hazardous substances. Still, things went far from smoothly, because for some reason, when tested, the swab that the agent used to swipe over my binder and clothing set off an alarm as positive for some unspecified "substance".

That's when the atmosphere got a lot more serious. Another agent was called. All my carry-on belongings had to be removed from my backpack and medical equipment bag and swabbed for "substances". I had to have a more intensive triple pat-down of my entire body, including my "sensitive areas" (TSA-speak for groin, buttocks and chest). Multiple parts of my body were swabbed, including all of the outside surfaces of my binder, which I had to reveal in its entirety by lifting my shirt. And when this round of swabs was analyzed, two of them again tested as positive for suspicious substances (apparently two different substances, though the agents wouldn't tell me what they might be).

At this point, supervisors were called, as well as an agency office in Madison. My ID was confiscated, and my name, address, license number and phone number taken for entry into some database. There were now three men in the room with me, and a supervising woman standing outside the door. I was given a very intensive pat-down. When conversation turned once again to my binder and how to "clear" it, I had to remind the agents that as a prosthetic device, I could not be asked to remove it. So an agent proceeded to wedge his hands under the binder and grope my chest-to disprove, I suppose, his hypothesis that my bound breasts might somehow be bombs-a deeply uncomfortable experience, physically and psychologically.

At this point I was worried that I wouldn't be allowed to board my plane at all. I really, really wanted to know what the agents thought my binder was contaminated with.

Here's the thing I didn't know at the time, that my daughter, waiting nearby, told me afterwards: it was obvious that something was wrong with the equipment that analyzes the screening swabs. It was oversensitive or faulty. The device was setting off an alarm to report detecting suspicious substances every time a swab was inserted for every person being tested, including a little old lady in a wheelchair.

The agents outside the screening room in which I were detained were complaining to one another about the equipment, and asking that it be recalibrated or replaced, as the next day was a busy one for holiday travel, and they were worried that the machine was going to cause a disaster in delays as it gave off false alarm after false alarm.

This situation in which I found myself reveals transphobia in action, because the alarms that were being taken very seriously in my case were not being taken seriously at all in the case of the other travelers my daughter observed setting off swab alarms. The agents must have felt that a bunch of middle-aged or older white cisgender travelers posed no real risk, and those travelers were quickly sent on their way. But I and my binder were treated as a credible threat. This is how privilege and marginalization work, along so many dimensions of identity: by determining what is deemed innocuous and what is considered suspicious. When I first entered the screening area, I was treated with friendly professional camaraderie, enjoying white male privilege-not pulled aside, for example, for the “random” additional screening that so often amounts to the screening of brown people at the Milwaukee airport. But once my trans status was revealed, the friendly TSA treatment I was experiencing quickly switched to intensive surveillance. Thus, alarms that were not taken seriously in the case of other passengers were treated with stony suspicion in my case.

Now, when I am detained for additional security screening, I always try to keep things light. I stay calm and make friendly conversation, in an attempt to present myself as nonthreatening, and as a human being making human connections. This time, two of the four agents who wound up inspecting and questioning me maintained an unsmiling stare despite my efforts to be friendly, but two responded by adopting a casual, chatting tone. Unfortunately, that proved as hurtful as it was helpful.

I think it was helpful, in that although I was detained for over three quarters of an hour, eventually I was released and allowed to board my plane, despite setting off TSA alarms several times. But it was hurtful in that it led to a further delay and additional screening-of my daughter.

So here’s how that transpired: During the screening, I had chatted with one of the agents about my travel plans-visiting relatives with my daughter-so the agents in the room with me knew that my travel companion was my college-aged child. But after my 45-minute screening was finished and I was just waiting for paperwork to be completed so I could be released, the door was opened, and the woman who was the supervisor, who was standing outside it, began chatting with me. She wanted me to know it would be a few more minutes until the paperwork was finished, and inquired about when my flight departed. I replied that I still had sufficient time to make my plane, as my wife and I had learned, both being transgender, that we needed to budget extra time for frequent additional screening.

The supervisor told me that that was very wise, and complained how so many people who ought to know better don’t budget the full two hours one is supposed to set aside to go through ticketing and security, and then get upset when they miss their planes. She then asked me a few questions about what I meant exactly when I stated that my spouse and I were transgender. I explained that I was assigned female at birth, while my wife was assigned male, but we had both legally gender transitioned. She responded in a manner both friendly and uncomfortable, saying,”I get you, even if lots of people are against that. You have to be yourself, even if people don’t understand it. You’re very lucky that you found a wife who understands.” (She also asked me, “How did they give you that beard?,” so I explained testosterone therapy.)

The supervisor then walked off, saying that they should have me released soon, but that now they would need to “screen my travel companion and her carry on items.” And she got another woman TSA agent, and took my daughter off to the “female” screening room.

I was puzzled by this, as was my kid, since she had been sitting nearby ever since I was detained after being scanned while she was not. She had been waiting for most of an hour without anyone implying she needed additional screening. But she complied, went off to be isolated in the screening room, watched while all her things were taken out of her backpack and examined, and submitted to a full-body pat-down. The supervisor chatted with her while doing this in a friendly manner, but was very thorough and intensive in the screening she was conducting. Then, at some point, the agent said something to my daughter about what “your husband explained.” My kid cut in to yelp, “Ack, that’s not my husband, that’s my DAD!” And suddenly the whole atmosphere changed, and the agent told my daughter she was free to go after three quick seconds of additional halfhearted patting.

It was immediately obvious that my daughter, who had set off no alarms and been considered no threat for 45 minutes, had suddenly transformed into a security risk in the mind of the TSA when an agent came to believe she was my transgender wife rather than my cisgender daughter. When this was revealed as a misunderstanding, the perception of my daughter as posing some sort of threat immediately evaporated. The TSA’s formal policy that passengers will be treated equally, regardless of gender identity, is belied by actions like this.

A few months ago, Shadi Petosky, a trans woman and television comedy producer, had an experience similar to mine with the TSA. A body scanner registered an “anomaly” in the area of her groin, she was patted down and questioned about what that anomaly was, and when she responded that she was a trans woman and that it was part of her anatomy, she was taken aside for additional screening. A swab of her clothing for some reason set off an alarm for some potentially explosive substance. She was interrogated, treated with anti-trans ignorance, subjected to stares and sniggers, and detained for a substantial period of time. Since she didn’t set aside the recommended two hours white cis people almost never set aside for screening, she missed her plane. She found the experience of her trans body being treated as a dangerous “anomaly” humiliating-and she live-tweeted what was happening to her until her phone was taken away.

Petosky’s case got a fair bit of media attention due to her experience being live-tweeted and shared. Afterwards, the TSA declared that they had listened carefully to Petosky’s complaints, and all would now be well, as the TSA was releasing a new policy. That policy was that the TSA would replace the word “anomaly” with “alarm”.

In fact, I know that this promised change in terminology has not actually been implemented at the level of practice. During my last TSA encounter, I referred to the body scanner’s response to my bound chest as “an alarm,” and was told by the supervisor that I was using terminology incorrectly: the swab setting off the analyzer was “an alarm,” while the body scanner had reacted to “an anomaly.”

But I really don’t care about whether the TSA calls my body “anomalous” or “alarming.” Under either term, trans bodies are treated as security threats. The supposed new TSA policy of saying “alarm” instead of “anomaly” does nothing more than put a gloss of sensitivity over an actual practice that frames trans bodies as strange, wrong, and dangerous.

Binary sex and gender policing are foundational to how body scanners are currently set up to function. Each passenger must be designated blue-for-boy or pink-for-girl in order to start the scan, and men are not “allowed” to have breasts, nor women to have a penis, according to the scanner’s software. As long as that is how body scans are conducted, trans bodies will inevitably be policed as security threats.

The TSA may claim that trans people will be treated just like cis people by its agents, but its nondiscrimination policy conflicts with the actual practices of its agents and the functioning of the body scanners they deploy.

For these reasons, things have not gotten better for those of us who are traveling while trans. The only thing that has really changed, in my experience, is that the TSA now presents itself as enlightened, and is congratulated for that-including by some LG(BTI) organizations.

In a way, it’s this that is for me the most frustrating and hurtful part of the whole situation. Trans people continue to be treated as wrongly and dangerously embodied. We continue to be pulled aside, isolated, groped, and our bodies stared at by TSA agents whose expressions often flash to that of a person smelling garbage. But we’re told that everything’s come up roses for us and we should dance for joy because we now live in the promised land of equality.

Better to just tell it like it is. The TSA’s actual policy is that people with bodies that do not conform to binary, cisgender expectations can be treated as freakish security threats. If you have a body like that, budget an hour more of time at the airport than your friends with conforming bodies set aside, or you may miss your plane.

That’s the real policy under which I operate whenever I fly.

A version of this article first appeared on Trans Fusion.

Suggested citation

Guest. "The TSA: a binary body system in practice." TransAdvocate, January 3, 2016. https://www.transadvocate.com/the-tsa-a-binary-body-system-in-practice_n_15540.htm