

Pink Tax: Do Women's Products Cost More than Men's?

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Abstract

This paper investigates the existence and root causes of the "pink tax," a form of gender-based price discrimination found in everyday consumer markets. While it isn't an official tax, the pink tax describes the tendency for products marketed towards women to carry higher price tags than their male equivalents. Through a product-by-product comparison of razors, deodorants, and hair care products, this study examines differences in price, quantity, function, research and development, and labour inputs to determine whether those price gaps are justified. The findings reveal that in many cases, women's products are priced higher despite doing essentially the same job as men's versions. These disparities show up most clearly in everyday essentials, where differences in packaging or branding don't convincingly explain the size of the price gap. The paper also considers the counterargument that product differentiation drives these differences, giving it fair consideration while pointing out where it falls short, particularly in categories where there is no meaningful variation between gendered versions. The analysis suggests that the pink tax is better understood as a demand-side issue, shaped by market segmentation, consumer behaviour, and relatively inelastic demand. The paper argues that gender-based pricing reflects deeper structural patterns in the market, raising important questions about fairness, efficiency, and the role of policy in addressing such disparities.

Keywords: Pink Tax, Price Discrimination, Gender Inequality, Consumer Behaviour, Market Segmentation, Consumer Behaviour

Introduction

In India, a children's toy medical kit is priced at ₹699 for boys. However, the same exact toy kit is priced at ₹899 for girls.¹ It uses identical plastic materials and serves the exact same function. No difference in material, nor any additional component, and no greater complexity in the manufacturing that justifies the ₹200 gap. The singular difference is the gender on the packaging. This isn't an isolated pricing anomaly; instead, it is an explicit instance of what economists call gender-based pricing discrimination. It reflects a pattern that may follow women from her childhood through every single stage of her adult life as a consumer.

This incident is known as "pink tax". It's not a formal government levy, but a de facto surcharge that's integrated in the everyday pricing of gendered products and services. In simple economic terms, it is a form of third-degree price discrimination. Through market-segmentation of

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gender, firms seem to charge higher prices for female consumers, further exploiting lower price elasticity of demand among women conditioned by social norms to buy majorly gender-specific products. The proof behind this is documented across industries, confirmed by government reports, and has been named, studied and ordained against for decades. Yet, it perseveres. This paper argues that gender-based disparities are real and may be driven not only by differences in production costs or functional difference, but also by market segmentation and the assumption that women will, in some cases, pay more indubitably. Through a product-by-product analysis of razors, deodorants, hair products, children's goods and dry-cleaning services, the paper demonstrates that in each category, price is the singular meaningful difference between men's and women's versions of the same product.

A Systematic Problem: Origins and Scale of Pink Tax

Pink tax is not a recent discovery, nor is it a fringe concern. The U.S. Government Accountability Office confirms in its 2018 report that firms often differentiate consumer products by gender through its colour or scent, and that even after controlling the product size, women may be subjected to paying extra for five of ten personal care categories; like deodorants, shaving cream or body sprays.² In 2015, New York City Department of Consumer Affairs analysed 794 products across about 100 brands. It found that women's products cost 7% more on average overall, and 13% more specifically in personal care.³ Alongside this, the Joint Economic Committee report from the U.S. Congress found women's products more than twice as likely to be priced higher than comparable men's products, with prices being the same only about 40% of the time.⁴

These figures not only establish an anomaly in the aisle, but instead a pattern woven across the entire consumer market. Pink tax spans across personal care, hair care, clothing, and many other products and services. It's a vast accumulation. A woman purchasing razors, shampoo/conditioner, deodorant or availing dry cleaning services may face multiple instances of price differences simultaneously, not just one, nearly every month for decades.

Researchers estimate that the total lifetime cost can exceed \$1,300 per year.⁵ That, however, is only a figure that does not yet account for menstrual products, higher insurance premiums or the occasional gender pay gap, that further reduces the income from which all these purchases are made. Understanding pink tax requires seeing it as not just a few isolated items but as a potentially systematic pattern within the market that treats women's money less valuable than men's.

Methodology, Data and Findings

Product-by-product analysis

The five tables below compare women's products to men's versions, across six dimensions: price, quantity, function, research and development, packaging and labour time. The analytical method is quite simple. If the price differs, but every other row is the same, then there's no plausible justification for a price difference.

Table 1. Razors

Factor	Women's	Men's
Price	~11% higher per cartridge on average	Standard price
Quantity	Same cartridge count	Same cartridge count
Functions	Hair removal	Hair removal
Packaging	Pink or purple, floral branding	Blue, gray, bold branding
R&D Costs	Same blade technology	Same blade technology
Labor Time	Identical manufacturing process	Identical manufacturing process

Table 1 presents pink tax in one of its clearest forms. Women pay approximately 11% more per cartridge than men,⁶ and yet, going through every row in the table very explicitly reveals the same entry on both sides: same cartridge count, same function, the blade technology remains the same and so does the manufacturing process. The singular difference between women's and men's columns, despite price, appears to be its packaging. Men usually have blue/grey, bold designs whereas women have pink and floral. This is a contradiction the table makes quite difficult to ignore, this is because women aren't paying for a better razor, they are simply paying for a different colour which may suggest that branding and product positioning play a role in the price difference.

A peer-reviewed study published in the International Journal of Women's Dermatology found women's four blade-razors priced 66% higher than men's, and the five-blade razors 47% higher. There is no significant difference in the number of special features between the two.⁷ The razor gap matters not just as a single overcharge but as a template. Economically it shows how firms may choose to exploit inelastic demand: female consumers, conditioned by social norms to buy gender-specific products, may not readily substitute towards men's razors, therefore potentially giving manufacturers pricing powers that they wouldn't have in a competitive, gender-neutral market.

Table 2. Deodorants

Factor	Women's	Men's
Price	~\$0.25-\$1.00 more on average	Lower baseline
Quantity	Typically 0.5-1 oz less per unit	Larger volume
Functions	Odor and wetness control	Odor and wetness control
Packaging	Soft colors, floral scents	Bold colors, sport scents
R&D Costs	Same core formulation	Same core formulation
Labor Time	Same manufacturing	Same manufacturing

Note: The GAO found women’s deodorants significantly more expensive per unit.⁸ BeautyMatter acknowledges some women's products add minor moisturising agents, but the core antiperspirant formulation remains the same.⁹

If the razor table portrays pink tax as a single overcharge, the deodorant shows it operating as a double penalty. Women pay about \$0.25-\$1.00 more per unit on average, but this price may not be fully justified, in fact the quantity of product received by women is often lesser as well.¹⁰ This simply means that the effective cost-per-ounce gap is significantly much wider than the price sticker seems to suggest, and therefore it means that women would return to the store and pay the premium price again, sooner. Another observation is that the function, research and development, and labour time all remain the same, just like with the razors. This very prominently confirms that the product has the same core formulation and manufacturing process. An article by BeautyMatter notes that some women's deodorants include moisturising agents,¹¹ but this minor addition may not proportionally justify both a higher price and a lower volume. Deodorant is an everyday requirement, not just a discretionary purchase. The pink tax here is not imposed on a luxury good; instead, it is levied on an unavoidable part of daily life, which may reflect differences in consumer behavior and willingness to pay. This, thus, makes the cumulative extraction of consumer surplus, which is paid repeatedly every couple of months, for decades.

Factor	Women's	Men's
Price	~48% more per oz on average	Lower price per oz
Quantity	Often smaller bottle at higher price	Larger bottle at lower price
Functions	Cleansing and conditioning	Cleansing and conditioning
Packaging	Floral, pastel, premium aesthetic	Bold, minimal, utilitarian
R&D Costs	Often same formula with added fragrance or dye	Base formula
Labor Time	Same manufacturing process	Same manufacturing process

Note: Consumer reports found women shampoos up to about 48% more expensive per ounce than men’s.¹² Moshary, Tuchman and Bhatia found prices differences largely disappear when products share the same initial ingredients, further confirming the premium is marketing-driven, rather than formula driven.¹³

The hair care table contains the most major price gap throughout this paper. 48% – 49% more per ounce for women's shampoo and conditioner.¹⁴ The functions in this table, yet again, are the same- cleansing and conditioning hair. Alongside this, the time spent by labour remains the same too. The only difference recognized is in the R&D row, where women products sometimes contain an added scent or fragrance. However, just a couple drops of floral scent does not constitute a value of 48% more. The quantity row compounds this problem further, as

women bottles are often smaller, so they basically pay more per ounce only for it to run out faster and therefore must pay the unjustified premium price again.

Moshary, Tuchman, and Bhatia confirmed the mechanism directly. When men’s and women’s products share the same leading ingredients, the price gap largely disappears,¹⁵ which means the markup functions as economics rent is extracted through branding and market segmentation and not through any genuine value-added in production, therefore exploiting female consumers. Hair care is an almost daily used product bought multiple times across one's lifetime. At 48% more per ounce, this single category costs women thousands of dollars over a lifetime for what it is, in most cases, the exact same product in differently coloured bottles.

Factor	Women's	Men's
Price	Girls' items 7–15% higher on average	Lower baseline price
Quantity	Same item count	Same item count
Functions	Play and safety (identical function)	Play and safety (identical function)
Packaging	Pink, purple, princess and fairy themes	Blue, red, action themes
R&D Costs	No meaningful difference	No meaningful difference
Labor Time	Same production process	Same production process

Note: The 2015 NYC DCA study found girls cycles, scooters and helmets being priced higher than boy's equivalents despite the identical construction.¹⁶ In the UK, girls were charged an average of 37% more for toys, cosmetics, and clothing.¹⁷

Children's products represent the most compelling evidence in the paper, as it effectively eliminates any possible argument of pink tax being applied to adult consumer preferences. There are limited signals involved, no brand loyalty to reward, nor is there any consumer choice being exercised. A child doesn't usually even choose their own helmet and yet the items are priced 7 to 15% higher on average,¹⁸ and the table shows that every single row except price and packaging is identical- same quantity, same function, no significant difference in R&D difference, and same production process. One helmet is blue and one is pink. Except, pink costs more. The 2015 NYC DCA study documented this across bike, scooters, and helmets,¹⁹ and in the UK the same pattern was found at an even more pronounced scare. Girls are charged 37% more on average across toys, cosmetics and clothing.²⁰ This significance is extended beyond the overcharge itself. Pricing girl's products higher from birth, normalises the pink tax before a girl is old enough to question it. It teaches her, through the structure of the marketplace, that being female is a luxury condition. That her version of things cost more, as a matter of course. Children's products are where the pink tax may reproduce itself over time.

Table 5. Dry Cleaning Services		
Factor	Women's	Men's
Price	~\$3.95 to clean a women's shirt	~\$2.06 to clean a men's shirt
Quantity	1 shirt cleaned and pressed	1 shirt cleaned and pressed
Functions	Fabric cleaning and pressing	Fabric cleaning and pressing
Packaging	N/A	N/A
R&D Costs	No difference	No difference
Labor Time	Similar or identical process	Similar or identical process

The dry-cleaning table is the simplest and also analytically the most conclusive in this paper. Unlike the product tables, there is no packaging row that differs. The R&D row also lacks difference; the labor time remains the same as the process is identical. One shirt goes in and then it comes out clean and pressed. And yet women are charged \$3.95 for this service while men are charged \$2.06 for the same item. Which reflects a gap of nearly 92%.²¹

Lafferty’s 2019 research documented this disparity across comparable plain button-down shirts of equivalent fabric weight, controlling for garment complexity.²² Some dry cleaners have pointed to the shape of women's garments as justification, but many studies show that using equivalent garments shows the gap persists regardless. The most telling evidence that cost may not explain is this legislative: California passed the Gender Tax Repeal Act in 1996 specifically because decades of market operations had not closed the gap.²³ That no federal equivalent exists 30 years later is not simply an oversight but instead a policy choice. The service sector's application of pink tax is inescapable in a way that product pink tax is not, and it also operates invisibly, transaction by transaction, across a professional women’s entire working life.

The Menstrual Product Tax: State enforces Pink Tax

Similar to the product pink tax is what is commonly known as the “tampon tax”. More accurately, a tax on all menstrual products, including both pads and tampons, applied in eighteen of the U.S. states as of 2025 despite their status as medical need.²⁴ This term is a misnomer: it is not tampons alone that are taxed, but the entire category of menstrual products. In the states where the tax applies, a pack of pads cost on average \$6.50 and a pack of tampons averaging \$8.29 are both subjected to standard sales tax, while groceries and prescription medication in those same states are not.²⁵

What makes tampon tax distinct from every other form of pink tax is that it is not a corporate decision- it is a state policy. In most American states, groceries are exempt as essential goods, medication as medical necessities, and even dandruff shampoo and sunscreen are exempt in some states on the grounds that they serve a health function. Menstrual products are no less medically necessary than any of these, and for no justified reasons are taxed as luxury goods. This inconsistency is difficult to justify on any neutral standard as it reflects a classification

system built around products used predominantly by men as the default definition of “essential”. The National Organisation for women has argued that this is not a neutral classification- it is a political one.²⁶ Legislative progress has been made in New York, California, India, Germany, and Columbia, but no federal standard currently exists in the other parts of United States.²⁷

Discussion

Counterarguments

The strongest challenge to the pink tax thesis comes from a study by economists Sarah Tuchman, Natasha Bhatia and Anna Tuchman, which drew on scanner data from nearly 40,000 retail stores and found that when comparing products with identical initial ingredients, the price difference noticed between men’s and women’s products largely disappear.²⁸ The researchers concluded that the average household would save barely 1% by switching to men’s alternatives of their personal care products, and therefore argue that much of the observed price gap may be attributed to product differentiation rather than gender-based discrimination.

This finding matters particularly because it suggests that not all price differences are necessarily justified. First, it applies to packaged consumer goods with comparable ingredients list. However, it has nothing to say about dry cleaning, where there are no ingredients to compare, and yet the gap reaches 92% or about children’s products, where a plastic helmet has no ingredients listed at all. Second, even with categories that do cover, ingredient similarity does not fully explain a 48% price gap per ounce in hair care products. Packaging differs. Marketing spend differs. The assumption about who is ready to pay more. Consumer behaviour and brand loyalty also may play a role. What the Moshary-Tuchman-Bhatia study ultimately demonstrates is that the pink tax is not purely a production cost phenomenon, but it is a demand side phenomenon, sustained by price inelasticity and market segmentation.²⁹

The Compounding Effect

Each of the price gaps documented in this paper operated independently. Together, they form a compounding system. Women who earn less by still approximately 84 cents for every dollar earned by men, are simultaneously charged more for razors, deodorants, shampoo, children’s helmets and their dry-cleaning bills.³⁰ The National Organisation for Women has described this as a form of double discrimination. Lower wages on the income side, higher prices on the spending side.³¹ For women of colour, who still face a wider wage gap, the compounding effect may be more fatal. Beyond everyday purchases, women also pay more for long- term care insurance and annuities due to longer life expectancies, and receive smaller average pension layouts.³² The World Economic Forum has noted that the United Nation now treats the elimination of gender-based pricing as a prerequisite for its own full economic participation which is again not a consumer issue but actually a structural one.³³ Viewed in this light, pink tax isn’t an inconvenience. It is only one node in a system of gendered market failure that may contribute to consistently transferring economic surplus away from women, reducing their real wages on the income side and side-by-side diminishing their purchasing power on the expenditure side.

Conclusion

All five tables in this paper repeat the same story. Besides price and packaging, everything else is the same. Function, quantity, R&D costs, labour time are all the same. That is the pink tax in its most precise definition: women paying more for identical value, not because the products warrant it, but because the market has decided that they will. This has been documented since at least the 1990s. California banned gender-based pricing in services in 1996.³⁴ The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs published its landmark study in 2015.³⁵ The GAO confirmed the pattern in 2018.³⁶ And yet even in 2026, there is no federal law prohibiting gender-based price discrimination in the United States. A woman buying a razor, a bottle of shampoo or a stick of deodorant this week may pay the pink tax on all three products. Her daughter, too, if nothing changes, will likely pay it too. The question this evidence raises is not whether the pink tax exists or if it is settled. The question is why, after three decades of documentation, it has been allowed too.

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