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# Pink Tax: The Hidden Cost of Being a Woman

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## ABSTRACT

The “pink tax” is the everyday, unofficial habit of charging more for products and services aimed at women than for near-identical versions aimed at men. This paper looks at that pattern from two angles — the international evidence base and the specific situation in India — and asks what mechanisms drive it, how big it actually is, and what it costs women over time. Drawing on the 2015 New York City Department of Consumer Affairs study, more recent Indian survey research, and dermatology and marketing literature published between 2022 and 2025, the picture that emerges is real but uneven: women pay measurably more in some product categories and not in others, and the size of the gap depends heavily on which category, country, and dataset you are looking at. In India, where the gender pay gap sits near 19%, even a modest consumption-side premium compounds an existing income disadvantage. The paper walks through documented premiums in razors, salon services, and personal care items, and traces how gendered marketing normalizes these differences rather than justifying them on cost grounds. It also surveys the regulatory responses that exist so far — California's Gender Tax Repeal Act, the UK's and Australia's removal of tax on menstrual products, and India's 2018 GST exemption on sanitary napkins — while noting how thin consumer protection remains outside a handful of narrow categories. The paper closes with practical suggestions for consumers, businesses, regulators, and researchers, on the view that gender equity claims ring hollow if they stop at the office door and never reach the checkout counter.

**Keywords:** pink tax, gender-based pricing, consumer inequality, gender pay gap, marketplace discrimination

## INTRODUCTION

Picture an ordinary week of shopping: a razor, a bottle of shampoo, a haircut, a shirt dropped off at the dry cleaner. Nothing unusual about any of it — except that for millions of women, each of these routine purchases quietly costs more than the equivalent purchase would for a man. That pattern has picked up a nickname, the “pink tax,” and it describes something narrower and stranger than an actual tax: a private, decentralized habit among retailers of pricing women's goods and services higher than men's, even when the underlying product is functionally the same.

It isn't a government levy, and it isn't collected by anyone in particular. It shows up instead as a pattern across thousands of individual pricing decisions — a pink razor costing more than its blue counterpart, a bottle of women's shampoo priced above a nearly identical men's version, a woman's haircut running well past what a man pays for comparable time in the chair (Wishart et al., 2024).

Any single instance of this looks trivial — a few rupees, a small percentage. But multiply that across a lifetime of purchases and the number stops being trivial. The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, in the most rigorous study to date on the subject, compared 794 products across 35 categories in 2015 and found women's versions priced higher in all but five of those categories, averaging 7% more overall (New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, 2015). More recent Indian survey work echoes the same underlying sense of unfairness among consumers, even where the pricing data is thinner (Biswas et al., 2024).

The timing of this matters more in some places than others. India's gender pay gap sits close to 19%, and women there already carry a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and caregiving work. Layering a consumption-side premium on top of an income disadvantage produces something worse than either problem alone — women earning less while simultaneously spending more just to buy the same things men buy.

Underneath the pricing data sits a harder question about what the pink tax says about how markets treat femininity. Why would a razor cost more because it's marketed to a woman, when it performs an identical function? What does it mean that packaging color, fragrance, or a "softer" marketing angle can be enough to justify a markup? These questions matter regardless of whether every individual price gap survives scrutiny, because the pattern as a whole reveals something about how gender gets monetized in ordinary commerce.

This paper works through that pattern in stages: what the pink tax is and how it operates, what the international evidence shows, how it plays out specifically in India, why it matters beyond the rupee-and-cents math, and what consumers, businesses, regulators, and researchers might actually do about it.

Writing more than a decade ago, one of the earliest researchers to name this problem directly, Meena (2019), called the pink tax "one of the least talked about topics" in gender economics — a fair description of how little sustained attention it still receives relative to its cumulative financial weight.

## Understanding the Pink Tax: More Than Just Pink Packaging

### Defining the Phenomenon

At its core, the term describes cases where a product or service marketed to women costs more than a comparable version marketed to men, without a corresponding difference in production cost or functionality. Meena (2019) frames it as a "hidden charge" attached simply to being identified as a woman in the marketplace.

The mechanism varies. Sometimes it's the same product in different packaging — a razor in pink rather than blue. Other times companies point to different fragrances, formulations, or design choices as justification. The open question in every case is whether those differences reflect a genuine cost driver or function as cover for a price increase that has nothing to do with what the product costs to make.

### How the Pink Tax Operates

Differential pricing for gendered versions is the most visible mechanism: functionally similar personal care products — shampoos, deodorants, body washes — sold under separate men's and women's lines, with the women's line carrying the higher price despite comparable ingredients and package sizes.

Service-based gender pricing shows up outside of packaged goods altogether. Salons routinely charge women two or three times what men pay for haircuts requiring similar time and skill. Dry cleaners often charge more for a woman's blouse than a man's shirt of comparable fabric.

Taxation and classification disparities are a separate, narrower issue: in some jurisdictions, products used mainly by women — menstrual hygiene products, most notably — were historically classified as luxury goods and taxed accordingly. This is genuine tax policy rather than private market pricing, but it lands on consumers the same way.

Marketing-driven segmentation ties the whole pattern together: companies build "feminine" product lines around pink packaging, floral scents, and softer branding language, then price those lines at a premium — profiting from gendered marketing while reinforcing the stereotypes that make it work.

### The Metaphor of "Tax"

Nothing about the pink tax is a government-imposed levy, but the label captures something real: a consistent, cumulative surcharge tied to gender. The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs study found women's products priced roughly 7% higher on average than comparable men's products, across 35 categories

(New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, 2015). Later Indian survey research reached a similar qualitative conclusion, even without matching that study's scale (Biswas et al., 2024).

### Contested Evidence and Nuance

Not every researcher who has looked closely at this data agrees on how widespread the pattern really is. When comparisons are tightened to genuinely identical products — same brand, same size, same ingredient list — price gaps often shrink substantially or disappear. A widely discussed 2022 study of consumer packaged goods by Moshary, Tuchman, and Bhatia found a genuinely mixed picture: women's products were priced higher in some categories, such as deodorant, but lower in others, including razors; in an ingredient-matched, apples-to-apples comparison, the women's version actually came out cheaper in three of the five categories examined. The authors used this to question how much of the observed "pink tax" in packaged goods reflects deliberate gender-based discrimination versus ordinary product differentiation — and how well-targeted price-parity legislation actually is as a response.

None of this erases the pattern documented elsewhere — in personal care, services, and clothing, the premiums are well-attested and specific. But it does mean the honest version of this argument isn't "women always pay more, full stop." It's closer to: in a meaningful number of categories, particularly services and certain personal care lines, women pay more for comparable products, and the debate is really about how large that effect is, where it concentrates, and how much of it survives a fair like-for-like comparison.

## The Global Picture: International Evidence and Responses

### United States and Developed Markets

The most cited data point in this entire literature comes from the same NYC DCA study: 794 products, 35 categories, women's versions priced higher in all but five categories, averaging 7% overall — rising to 13% for personal care products and 8% for adult clothing (New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, 2015). Across the sample, women's products cost more 42% of the time, versus 18% of the time for men's products.

Estimates of the annual cost to an individual woman vary by source — commonly cited figures put the range at roughly $1,300 to $2,300 a year, drawing on a 1994 California state estimate of the annual "gender tax" on services and later financial-press reporting built on the NYC DCA baseline. Multiply that across a working lifetime and it adds up to a substantial sum, even before accounting for compounding or inflation.

More recent dermatology research adds a sharper edge to the personal care category. A 2025 study in the International Journal of Women's Dermatology compared topical minoxidil pricing across 25 U.S. retailers and found women's foam formulations priced roughly 20% above men's (Ong et al., 2025). That same study cites earlier work finding even larger gaps in adjacent categories — minoxidil foam premiums around 40% in a 2017 study, and facial moisturizer premiums around 50% in a 2019 study — suggesting the size of the gap has if anything narrowed somewhat over time in this particular category, even as it persists.

Regulation in the United States has arrived piecemeal. California's Gender Tax Repeal Act banned gender-based pricing for services back in 1995. New York followed with its own gender pricing law covering goods and services. At the federal level, the Joint Economic Committee's 2016 report, The Pink Tax: How Gender-Based Pricing Hurts Women's Buying Power, laid out the case for national action, though no comparable federal statute has followed.

Table 1. International regulatory responses to the pink tax

| Country/Region | Regulatory Action | Year | Scope | Impact |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| California, USA | Gender Tax Repeal Act | 1995 | Services (haircuts, dry cleaning) | Banned gender-based price discrimination for services |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| New York, USA | Gender Pricing Law | 2020 | Goods and services | Prohibited gender-based pricing disparities |
| United Kingdom | VAT exemption | 2021 | Menstrual products | Eliminated the 5% tax on sanitary items |
| India | GST exemption | 2018 | Sanitary napkins | Removed 12% GST on menstrual hygiene products |
| France | Price investigation | 2015 | Personal care products | Government inquiry into the 'invisible tax' on women |
| Australia | Tax reform | 2019 | Menstrual products | Removed GST on feminine hygiene items |

Source: compiled from policy documents, agency reports, and news coverage of each measure.

**European Context**

France's Finance Ministry opened an inquiry into whether women's personal care products carried unjustified premiums, with press coverage at the time framing it as an investigation into an “invisible tax” on women. The United Kingdom went further, eliminating its 5% VAT on menstrual hygiene products in 2021 on the explicit grounds that taxing an essential product this way amounted to gender discrimination.

**Developing Nations and the Global South**

Outside wealthy markets, the pink tax has drawn far less systematic study, even though the relative burden it imposes is plausibly larger. Where women's incomes are already lower, gender pay gaps wider, and consumer protection enforcement thinner, even a small percentage premium eats into a proportionally bigger share of household budgets. What limited cross-country evidence exists points toward a consistent underlying pattern of gendered consumption norms rather than an anomaly confined to any one market.

**The Indian Context: Evidence, Impact, and Awareness**

**Structural Setting and Cultural Factors**

India's economic backdrop makes this issue harder to shrug off than it might be elsewhere. Female labor force participation remains comparatively low, the gender pay gap sits near 19%, and consumption patterns are still shaped by fairly rigid gender norms. Any additional gender-linked cost lands on top of that existing disadvantage rather than alongside it.

A 2024 survey of 180 Indian respondents found that participants broadly recognized gender-based pricing as something that “perpetuates gender inequality, infringes on consumer rights, and worsens economic disparities” (Biswas et al., 2024), and that they could readily identify specific instances of it when asked. A separate 2025 analysis by Choudhary walks through how these costs accumulate across everyday goods and services for Indian women, product category by product category.

**The Sanitary Napkins Case**

India's most visible pink-tax controversy involved menstrual hygiene products. When GST rolled out, sanitary napkins were initially taxed at 12%, grouped with luxury goods. Activists organized sustained pressure — the #LahuKaLagaan (“blood tax”) campaign among them — arguing that a basic hygiene product had no business being taxed as a luxury. The government removed GST on sanitary napkins entirely in July 2018, a genuine policy win that also did a lot to put gendered pricing on the public radar, even if the broader pink tax problem remained largely untouched.

**Evidence of Pricing Premiums**

Quantitative research specific to India remains thinner than in the US, but the available evidence points in a consistent direction. In the 2024 survey noted above, 72.6% of respondents believed gender-based pricing exists in skincare and cosmetics, even though only 38.9% recognized the term “pink tax” itself (Biswas et al., 2024) — a gap suggesting the underlying unfairness is felt well before it's named.

Salons and beauty parlors typically charge women noticeably more than men for comparable services; national chains publish separate price lists that make the gap explicit rather than hidden. Clothing shows a similar pattern, with women's garments often priced above men's equivalents even accounting for genuine material or construction differences, and some evidence that import duties themselves vary by gendered product category. Dry cleaners commonly charge more for women's clothing, citing fabric delicacy — a justification that doesn't always survive scrutiny against the actual cost of cleaning the garment.

Table 2. Illustrative pink tax examples across product and service categories

| **Category** | **Women's Product/Service** | **Men's Product/Service** | **Price Difference** | **Context** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Razors | Pink razor (5 blades) | Blue razor (5 blades) | +25% (₹250 vs ₹200) | India |
| Personal care | Women's deodorant, 200ml | Men's deodorant, 200ml | +12.5% (₹180 vs ₹160) | Global average |
| Haircuts | Women's haircut | Men's haircut | +133% (₹700 vs ₹300) | India, urban salon |
| Dry cleaning | Women's blouse | Men's shirt | +43% (₹100 vs ₹70) | India |
| Clothing | Women's jeans | Men's jeans, same brand | +28% (₹1,800 vs ₹1,400) | Global retail |
| Shampoo | Women's shampoo, 200ml | Men's shampoo, 200ml | +20% (₹180 vs ₹150) | India |
| Children's toys | Girls' bicycle (pink) | Boys' bicycle (blue) | +14% (₹4,000 vs ₹3,500) | India |
| Body wash | Women's body wash | Men's body wash | +8-10% | US market data |

Note: figures are illustrative, drawn from retail surveys and the cited research (Biswas et al., 2024; Choudhary, 2025; New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, 2015; Wishart et al., 2024). Actual prices vary by brand, location, and time.

**Contributing Factors in Indian Markets**

Gender-coded marketing — pink packaging, floral scents, “gentle” language — manufactures a sense of differentiation that then gets used to justify a higher price, a pattern documented in both developed and developing markets alike (Meena, 2019; Shree, 2023).

Limited economies of scale is a more defensible explanation in some cases: if a women's product variant is manufactured in smaller volumes, unit costs genuinely can rise. Whether that fully accounts for the price gaps observed is a separate and much less settled question.

Willingness-to-pay assumptions on the part of companies — the bet that women will accept a higher price for something marketed as premium or specially formulated — is itself a byproduct of the same gender stereotypes the pricing then reinforces.

Service differentiation claims, particularly around haircuts and tailoring, sometimes hold up: longer hair or more intricate garment work can genuinely take more time. But a flat gender-based price that doesn't track actual service complexity looks a lot more like stereotyping than cost recovery.

Weak consumer awareness rounds out the picture: without a name for the pattern or a habit of comparing gendered product lines side by side, many buyers simply don't notice, or don't push back when they do.

**Regulatory Landscape**

India's Consumer Protection Act, 2019 prohibits unfair trade practices in general terms but doesn't single out gender-based pricing as its own category of harm. There is no dedicated legal mechanism to monitor, document, or penalize price differences that lack a legitimate cost basis. In practice, that leaves the issue to market forces, consumer awareness, and whatever voluntary steps individual companies choose to take.

**Why the Pink Tax Matters: Beyond Rupees and Cents**

**Economic Burden and Lifetime Costs**

The most direct impact is financial. Women already earn less than men in most economies, and in India that gap runs close to 19% for comparable work. Add a consumption-side premium and the effect compounds: lower income, higher spending, on top of each other rather than offsetting.

Even a modest 5–10% surcharge across personal care, clothing, and services adds up to real money annually, and a meaningful sum over a working lifetime — money that would otherwise go toward savings, education, or health care. For lower-income women, the same percentage premium bites harder, sometimes forcing a choice between paying it and doing without.

**Reinforcing Gender Inequality**

Beyond the direct cost, the pattern sends a quiet but persistent message: that femininity itself carries a price tag, and that charging more for it is unremarkable. Normalized enough times, that message contributes to a broader devaluation of women's economic standing that goes well past any single purchase.

**Stereotyping and Social Impact**

The pink tax depends on, and in turn reinforces, fairly rigid gender stereotypes. Marketing something as “for her” through color, scent, or softened branding language isn't a neutral description — it's a culturally constructed distinction that companies then monetize. Women don't pay more for a pink razor because pink costs more to produce; they pay more because “pink is for girls” has been marketed effectively enough to create a segmented, less price-sensitive market. Moshary et al.'s (2022) analysis of consumer packaged goods examines exactly this dynamic — while also cautioning, per the discussion above, that the resulting price effects are neither uniform nor always in the direction assumed.

**Intersection with Other Inequalities**

The pink tax doesn't land on all women equally. Women facing additional disadvantages — poverty, caste discrimination, disability, religious minority status — experience a compounded version of the same burden. Any serious response to this issue has to account for how it stacks on top of other structural inequalities rather than treating gender as the only relevant axis.

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### Consumer Rights and Market Fairness

From a straightforward consumer-rights standpoint, the pink tax raises an uncomfortable question: if two products do the same job, why does gender-coded marketing justify a different price? If a service takes the same time and skill either way, why should the customer's gender change the bill? These aren't just questions about individual pricing decisions — they're questions about what fair treatment in a market is supposed to mean.

## Moving Forward: Responses and Solutions

### Consumer-Level Strategies

Price comparison. Before buying, check the men's and women's versions of a product side by side — ingredients, size, features. If they're functionally the same, buy the cheaper one regardless of packaging.

Gender-neutral shopping. Razors, deodorants, shampoos — plenty of products marketed separately to men and women serve identical purposes. The “men's” or unisex version is often cheaper and works just as well.

Awareness and advocacy. Simply naming the pattern to friends and family builds the kind of consumer pressure that eventually shows up in company pricing decisions.

Supporting fair-pricing brands. Rewarding companies that commit to gender-neutral pricing sends a market signal that ethical pricing doesn't cost customer loyalty.

### Business and Corporate Responsibility

Price transparency. Companies that do have genuine cost differences between gendered product lines should be willing to explain them rather than leave the price gap unexplained.

Gender-neutral pricing. Where the underlying product is functionally identical, price it identically, regardless of how it's packaged or marketed.

Eliminating unnecessary gendering. Not every product needs a separate men's and women's line in the first place; fewer artificial market segments means fewer opportunities for unjustified price gaps.

Reputational stakes. Consumers increasingly notice and penalize pricing they see as exploitative, which gives companies a business reason — not just an ethical one — to close these gaps.

### Policy and Regulatory Action

Legislative frameworks. Consumer protection law could explicitly prohibit unjustified gender-based pricing, following the model California set with its Gender Tax Repeal Act.

Price monitoring. Government consumer affairs bodies could run periodic audits comparing gendered product lines and publish the results, the way NYC DCA did in 2015.

Transparency requirements. Companies could be required to disclose the actual cost basis, if any, for price differences between gendered versions of a product.

Tax policy review. India's 2018 removal of GST on sanitary napkins shows that tax policy itself can either compound or correct gender-based cost burdens, depending on how products are classified.

Consumer education. Government-backed awareness campaigns could help close the gap this paper's own data shows — between recognizing unfair pricing and actually knowing the term for it.

**Research and Civil Society**

Rigorous research. India in particular needs larger, more systematic price-comparison studies that control properly for genuine product differences — the kind of study NYC DCA ran a decade ago, adapted to the Indian retail context.

Intersectional analysis. Future work should look at how the pink tax's impact varies across income levels, regions, and other overlapping disadvantages, not just gender in isolation.

Advocacy campaigns. Civil society groups running their own “pink tax audits” of major retailers can create the kind of public accountability that regulation alone hasn't yet delivered.

Public discourse. Media coverage and public debate remain some of the most effective tools for turning a barely-named pattern into one consumers actively watch for.

# CONCLUSION

**Toward Gender-Fair Markets**

Taken as a whole, the pink tax is more than a pricing quirk. It's a specific, documented form of gender-based economic disadvantage — one that charges women more for comparable goods and services on the strength of gender-coded marketing and social norms that have very little to do with what anything actually costs to produce.

In India and elsewhere, women are already navigating a real gender pay gap and reduced economic opportunity relative to men. Adding a consumption-side premium on top of that doesn't just cost money in isolation — it compounds an existing disadvantage, eating into savings and narrowing choices over the course of a working life.

No single actor can fix this alone. Consumers can comparison-shop and choose gender-neutral products where they exist. Companies can adopt transparent, functionally-based pricing instead of gender-coded pricing. Policymakers can close the regulatory gaps that currently let unjustified price differences go unexamined. Researchers can keep building the evidence base — including, where the data actually points that way, acknowledging that not every category shows the same gap, or any gap at all.

Ultimately this is a question of principle as much as pricing. Gender equality claims don't mean much if they stop short of the checkout counter. As Meena (2019) put it, the pink tax remains “one of the least talked about topics” relative to its real significance — which is reason enough to keep documenting it, challenging it, and building toward markets where price tracks cost and value, not gender.

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