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The Pink Tax and Quality Problems in Women's Products: An Examination of Gendered Exploitation in the Consumer Market

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Abstract. Women worldwide are predicted to account for 70–80% of household buying decisions, exerting powerful influence upon global markets for consumers. Yet despite the resulting economic strength, women routinely experience systemic disadvantages, most conspicuously unfair pricing in the form of the "pink tax" and ongoing quality and safety deficits in products directed at them as females. This research examines the structural causes and impacts of such gender-related exploitation of consumers. Based on available scholarship, nationwide survey data, and recent Chinese case studies, the research uses a multi-faceted analysis integrating economic, cultural, and regulative perspectives. The findings establish that appearance-related norms and menstruating-related stigma induce gendered marketing and culturally sustained pricing and subpar product quality. Beyond that, ineffective regulative structures do not forbid discriminatory pricing or adequately enforce safety standards for products, solidifying the inequalities further. Such practices engender long-term costs to consumers who are predominantly women, decrease disposable incomes, widen wealth disparities across generations, and enforce gender stereotypes in society. The paper finds that eradicating such inequalities necessitates wholesale reforms such as explicit legislation to forbid gendered pricing, enhanced quality controls, product design responsibility by firms, and stronger activism by consumers. Eliminating such practices represents not merely a question of economic efficiency but a vital step toward the elimination of structural inequalities by gender and the achievement of a more equitable and transparent consumption culture.

Keywords: Pink tax, inequitable pricing, gender inequality, product safety, consumer right.

1. Introduction

The World Economic Forum estimates that 70 to 80 percent of all household buying decisions worldwide are made by women, creating a trillions-of-dollars-sized consumer market [1]. Such huge buying power gives women the power to dictate the future of entire industries ranging anywhere from the basic daily needs such as food, clothing, and personal care items to high-priced investments such as real estate properties, automobiles, and finance businesses. Such widespread involvement by

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women as consumers not only engenders economic growth but also acts as a key driver for innovation by corporates and the creation of new products and services by corporations addressing their needs.

Despite this significant and undeniable economic clout, the female consumer market has been persistently plagued by deep-rooted, systemic issues that reflect broader societal gender inequalities. Among these, two problems are particularly pervasive and damaging. First, there is the widespread phenomenon where products marketed specifically to women are often priced higher than substantially similar products marketed to men, despite offering nearly identical core functions. This practice is commonly referred to as the "pink tax." Second, and equally concerning, are the recurrent quality and safety issues found in products designed for women. These range from premium-priced cosmetics that fail to meet basic safety standards to essential sanitary products that pose potential health risks. It is crucial to understand that these are not merely isolated examples of market inefficiency but are symptomatic of a deeper, structured pattern of gender-based exploitation within the consumption ecosystem.

Research on such matters is vitally necessary because such issues affect society extensively and deeply. Scholar Li asserts that the commodification of the body of women and daily needs is both a reflection and continuation of a widespread gender inequity pattern—such a pattern that actually calls for women to pay the economic premium and usually accept lower-quality commodities and services in exchange [2]. Through the detailed exploration of such consumer inequalities, it can be better understood how the forces of markets, norms of culture, and institutional settings cumulatively work in maintaining such deep-seated gender hierarchies. More importantly, such analysis highlights the imperative necessity and urgency of systematic reformations of regulation and greater policy intervention in order to protect the rights of consumers adequately and bring genuine gender equality to the market.

2. Key issues in the market for women consumers

2.1. Inequitable pricing: the pink tax

“Pink tax” refers to a widespread gender-related budgetary imbalance in consumer markets, such that goods marketed to women are routinely set at a higher price than their masculine counterparts despite inherent functional equality. This represents a business pricing methodology and not a tax levied by the state, but the collective economics resulting impose a large and sustained budgetary penalty for women such that the budgetary flexibility and larger economy mobility are curtailed.

Substantive empirical evidence from China verifies the pervasiveness of this phenomenon. Intensive digital marketplace data analysis by Wang and Zhang revealed that products aimed at women on a regular basis enjoyed a price premium ranging from 7% to 15% when compared to similar male-targeted items despite the fact that in many cases their utilitarian function and material nature were identical [3]. A relevant example illustrating such a difference was the case of the razor segment: products that had pink hues, ergonomic forms customized for perceived feminine taste and gender-specific packs were automatically sold at high rates. Such price differentiation took place despite the fact that such products had the identical blade technology and lubrication mechanisms and were produced by the same company organizations. Such a pricing differential extended to a very broad range of product categories including personal care items such as deodorants and hair shampoos and basic health products such as analgesics.

Further corroboration came through a nationwide survey undertaken by the China Consumers Association [4]. The study came to the finding that commodity items like denim trousers, casual

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blouses, lingerie, and sanitary products aimed at a feminine clientele consistently displayed appreciable price markups when examined in comparison to ostensibly similar items for men. One instructive case study involved commonplace cotton T-shirts: those retailed through the ladies' store areas, not seldom just differentiated by fashion-cut or difference in shade palette, sold for 10 to 20 RMB more than comparable ones sold through the men's department. This premium persisted even when both items had the same grade and weight of cloth and the same manufacturers made them.

This institutionalized pricing model underscores a stark market contradiction: women, despite their escalating economic influence and contribution to consumer expenditure, are systematically subjected to inflated costs for essential commodities. The long-term financial consequences of this disparity are non-trivial. Economic projections suggest that the cumulative burden of the pink tax may compel women to expend an additional sum ranging from tens to hundreds of thousands of yuan over their lifetimes for commensurate consumption, thereby exacerbating the gender-based wealth gap.

2.2. Issues with women's product quality

Compounding the problem of unfair pricing is another significant and alarming issue: the subpar quality and concerning safety hazards found in many products designed for women. Despite often paying a premium, female consumers frequently face higher risks due to inadequate quality control, the use of inferior materials, and a concerning lack of stringent regulatory oversight in female-centric product categories.

In the first instance, the markets for basic feminine sanitary items, including sanitary pads and tampons, have come in for widespread condemnation. Various reports and independent lab analysis have shown that some Chinese brands have incorporated recycled pulp, unlisted fragrances, and fluorescent whitening agents in sanitary items. These are chemicals that lead to irritated skin and allergic reactions and carry possible long-term health hazards such as endocrine disruption. The scenario is compounded by the fact that such are the non-negotiable necessities and women are bound to keep paying for them despite the established quality issues and absence of affordable and safe alternatives.

Secondly, the massive cosmetics and beauty industry is rife with unspoken risks and opaque ingredient disclosure. As Sullivan detailed in her research, beauty products are aggressively marketed to women with promises of transformation and enhanced social acceptance, yet many contain a cocktail of hazardous ingredients [5]. Common issues include skincare and makeup products contaminated with high levels of preservatives (like parabens), mercury, and other heavy metals, which are linked to dermatological problems, organ toxicity, and other serious long-term health complications. The pressure to conform to beauty standards pushes women to consume these products despite the potential dangers.

Thirdly, inequality runs deep even in categories such as women's sportswear and exercise equipment. Most products are little more than "pink-washed"—a tactic whereby manufacturers merely put pink tones or flowers on identical items and sell them as the "female versions," not actually doing anything to enhance functionality, robustness, or ergonomic design-specific to the feminine body. As a case in point, women's running shoes are cosmetically designed while focusing more on looks than functionality, such that the shoes provide less support for the arches, shorter life in the sole and less shock absorption than men's equivalents in the same price segment. This is not just poor value for money but also causes greater risk while exercising.

These recurring quality problems expose a discouraging fact: the market for women's products tends to value surface sheens and headline gimmicks more than basic values of safety, performance,

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and value. This puts the woman shopper in the position of going through the cycle of buying high-priced and often subpar goods.

3. Reasons for the issues

3.1. Issues with women's product quality

Gendered selling is one key driver for both price discrimination and lower quality products. In order to ostensibly create market differentiation and enhance price discrimination, corporations deliberately "feminize" goods by selective packaging, color (predominantly pink and pastels), and selling narratives highlighting beauty versus functionality.

As Chen notes in her analysis of Asian purchasing behavior, it is standard industry procedure for corporations to introduce two variants of essentially identical product goods: a standard (or "male") variant and a "female" variant differentiated by pink packaging, flowers or token fashion design differences [6]. The feminine variant is then sold at a premium by playing on the internalized stereotype that females are less price-conscious and care more about appearance and styling and accept such gratuitous design variations as additional value deserved at a higher price.

This challenge is seriously amplified by specialized advertising campaigns. Media commercials constantly promulgate the notion that a woman must buy certain, usually additional, items to be clean, pretty, or socially acceptable. The subtext is that feminine consumption isn't merely utilitarian but identity- and social-performance-centered. These tendencies are currently turbo-charged by algorithmic social media and online advertising, which incessantly expose women to customized pitches for beauty items, lifestyle items, and health items, imposing ongoing psychological pressure to consume and comply. Sullivan observes that this digitally-facilitated targeting makes it ever-harder for women to escape such market forces [5].

This elaborate system falsifies and exaggerates demand by convincing women that they should spend more to fulfill social obligations despite the presence of cheaper alternatives that are just as effective.

3.2. Cultural and social factors

The consumer disparities women face are not solely a result of corporate strategy; they are deeply rooted in cultural norms and social expectations. One crucial factor is the immense social pressure placed on women to maintain a polished, youthful, and aesthetically pleasing appearance. Women face harsher social and professional judgment based on their looks, which in turn drives higher spending on skincare, cosmetics, fashion, and beauty services. Li powerfully argues that the commercialization of women's bodies in contemporary consumer society transforms femininity itself into a commodity that requires continuous investment and upkeep, creating a lucrative but exploitative market [2].

Another deep-seated cultural driver is the ongoing stigma related to menstruation and feminine health. Menstruation continues to be viewed in most societies, including elements of Chinese culture, as a "private," "delicate," or even " shameful" matter not fit for mass discussion. This stigma suppresses frank discussion regarding the price, quality, and safety of sanitary products. As such, females do not have clear avenues to compare products and exchange insights, and businesses find it easier to overprice and undeliver without public challenge. This reticence also means lower public understanding and less effective regulatory control since matters that touch upon the health of females are not taken seriously through public policy and monitoring-of-markets initiatives.

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These sociocultural variables together sanction higher costs for females and establish a context in which responsibility is restricted and the woman consumer particularly exposed in the market.

3.3. Absence of robust law and regulation

A key enabler of both gendered price discrimination and quality differentials is the lacking and often gender-insensitive nature of dominant regulative norms. Within the People's Republic of China legal culture, a significant legislative gap continues to exist because explicit provisions in the prevailing statutes banning the differentiation of pricing on the basis of gender explicitly do not exist. Although general protections such as the Law on the Protection of Consumer Rights and Interests do exist and take precedence, they are not adequately effective to confront the "pink tax" directly because they do not officially delineate or ban such specific discriminatory behavior. The legal loophole essentially represents the carte blanche for corporations to adopt unfair pricing models and incur little legal penalty or deterrence.

Parallel inadequacies exist in the area of quality assurance and safety monitoring for products mainly consumed by females. While formal standards for the production of sanitary items and makeup exist at the national level, the practical implementation thereof is often marked by inconsistency, leniency, and a significant lack of robustness. Fines paid by actors who contravene the standards are often too weak in nature to induce compliance and hence do not operate effectively as a deterrent to malpractice. As highlighted by the China Consumers Association, the available redress mechanisms unload a disproportionate burden on consumers by necessitating them to undergo a process that is frequently too costly to be viable, time-consuming, and subject to a high threshold of evidence [4]. Such significant hurdles actively deter people from resorting to legitimate causes through the proper channels.

The convergence of such regulative failures gives birth to a culture of impunity such that firms can concentrate on maximum returns on profit at the expense of the quality of the product and reasonable pricing. Firms are afforded the flexibility to decide on substandard materials, production integrity, and protection measures while maintaining high price labels targeting the feminine clientele.

Lastly, this gap in legislation reflects a larger failure at the systemic level: the particular violations of rights and the resulting challenges faced by consumers who are female never received sufficiently high priority on the agendas of policy-forming processes. The question of exploitation by gender in the markets for consumers never reached broad status as a priority issue necessitating specially crafted intervention by statute. As such, only until there exists the enactment of very particular provisions of the law that explicitly acknowledge and seek remedies for this type of discrimination will females inevitably continue to shoulder a disproportionate and unfair economic and health burden as consumers.

4. Impacts and consequences

4.1. Economic impact

The long-term price premium imposed on women’s daily necessities not only creates an additional financial burden at the individual level but also contributes to structural economic inequality. Surveys indicate that women’s average monthly spending on categories such as personal care, clothing, and cosmetics is consistently higher than men’s, while comparable products for women are often priced 10% to 30% higher [7]. When compounded over time, this disparity significantly

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reduces women's disposable income and limits their ability to invest in education, professional training, and health management. The impact is particularly severe for women from low-income backgrounds. For instance, some rural women are forced to purchase lower-quality sanitary products due to financial constraints, which may lead to skin allergies or infections [8]. This economic disadvantage not only lowers women's quality of life but also diminishes their ability to accumulate resources and opportunities, perpetuating intergenerational inequality.

4.2. Social fairness

The price elevation phenomenon goes hand in hand with culturally-grounded expectations that women must spend greater money and energy on looks and grooming. Such assumptions are constantly reinforced by the market and socialized in public awareness [9]. Consequently, excessive female consumption comes to be taken for granted while price discrimination awareness continues to be poor. In most instances, a woman's status or standard of living is pinpointed directly by her level of consumption. The thinking not only widens inequalities in consumption but also erodes the larger basis for equality by gender. Such norms establish imperceptible barriers cumulatively and limit women's social and economic means further in the long run.

4.3. Reproduction of gender discrimination

Economic inequality tends to spill over into other domains, reinforcing systemic gender discrimination. In the workplace, higher living costs may push women toward more stable and lower-risk occupations, thereby reducing their chances of entering high-paying, competitive fields [10]. In education, women facing financial pressures may reduce investments in further study or skill development, which weakens their competitiveness. Meanwhile, gendered marketing strategies in media and advertising continue to construct women primarily as consumers, positioning them in a passive role of "spending for appearance" [11]. This interplay of economic and cultural mechanisms creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which women remain disadvantaged in wealth accumulation, social influence, and decision-making power, further entrenching structural gender gaps [12].

5. Improvements and strategies

5.1. Policy and legal measures

To eliminate gender-based price disparities, clear legal frameworks must first be established. Governments could draw lessons from legislative practices in the European Union and certain U.S. states by incorporating gender pricing discrimination into consumer protection and pricing laws [11]. Explicit provisions should prohibit charging higher prices for products of equal function and quality solely on the basis of gender. Additionally, tax exemptions on sanitary products should be promoted to alleviate the financial burden on women [8]. Establishing a nationwide price transparency database—managed by government or third-party institutions—would also allow consumers to compare product prices across different channels, thereby weakening the market space for the "pink tax" [7]. Legal and informational interventions together could effectively curb this discriminatory practice.

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5.2. Market and corporate responsibility

Since corporations are the major producers and price setters, they hold the key to breaking through gendered price mark-ups and quality differentials. First reforms would pare back the deployment of packaging, color and cosmetic variation as a means of price increases and shift to neutral functionally centred forms of products instead [12]. Higher quality control norms must then be taken up in the feminine hygiene, skincare and sport business sectors most particularly [10]. Third-party testing firms independent of producers can be introduced to conduct regular checks and publish findings, boosting both traceability and trust among consumers [8]. As well as compliance, companies may instil gender equality values in brand positioning and use advertising and company social responsibility projects to bring about more balanced consumption patterns [9].

5.3. Consumers and social action

Social change Consumers, both victims and the most significant actors in the battle against the "pink tax," should be the prime agents for change. Initial steps by consumers should be to strengthen the ability to compare prices and assess quality utilizing digital platforms and social media in the active process to expose acts of discrimination and to gather public pressure [7]. The second step should be rational consumption fostered and the tendency to be dependent on excessive marketing reduced while pushing back at the notion—oftentimes propagated by advertising—the woman must always shop in order to maintain self-esteem [9]. Civil society representatives can also be involved, e.g.: Sanitary Pad Mutual Aid Boxes, free sanitary products provided in schools, library spaces and community areas in order to reduce budget and psychological stress in the eventuality of emergences, and Sanitary Pad Charity Sales, selling sanitary products at low or subsidized prices while conducting public awareness campaigns regarding price, tax, and consumers' rights [8]. Sustainable transformation in the long term requires collective action by consumers, businesses, and policymakers. It is only through shared action that the institutional exploitation that exists in the industry of the women's products can be eradicated and the way prepared for a better and clearer world for the consumers.

6. Conclusion

The researches on gendered exploitation in the economy of consumption for women prove that price discrimination and differential quality are not accidental, but structural.

One of the most powerful economic segments—defining global consumption and industry development—are the women. However, in spite of such a central position, they remain exposed to higher prices in the form of the "pink tax" and higher risk of toxics or poor-quality products. This contradiction testifies to the persistence of structural unfairness in the culture of consumption. Three key factors perpetuate this exploitation. First, gendered marketing ironically differentiates women's products by using mere surface-level difference in color, packaging, or mark to sell essentially similar functionality at a higher price. Advertising widens the exploitation by compelling women to consume more to meet social expectations of beauty and cleanliness.

Second, social norms and expectations reinforce the acceptance of inequity. Appearance-related expectations and menstruation-related stigma deter open discussion about fairness and lessened scrutiny of the price and quality of products.

Third, the lack of robust legal frameworks aggravates the issue. Existing consumer protection legislation does not confront gendered pricing head-on, and quality standards for women's products,

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including sanitary items and beauty products, are weakly enforced. The repercussions of such dynamics far exceed the sphere of the marketplace. Economically, women end up paying far more for basic necessities than men do each day, eroding disposable incomes and limiting investment possibilities in education, job skills, or health. Socially, the high consumption expectations reinforce the very stereotypes that associate feminine value with beauty and hygiene and rob women of freedom and structural equality. Such economic and cultural disparities spill over the long term into education, the workplace, and public life and replicate gender disparities in wealth accumulation, social power, and decision-making influence. Solutions must then be multi-dimensional.

At the policy level, governments should set forth explicit restrictions on gender-specific pricing and impose higher quality controls, while implementing tax relief initiatives such as sanitary product exemptions. The development of clear price databases would also allow consumers to spot and oppose discriminatory practices. At the company level, businesses must break away from gender-centered marketing and focus on functional, high-quality, and inclusive product lines. Outside quality checks and publicly available reporting may help ensure company accountability. Consumers and civil society organizations similarly play a crucial role by opposing excessive consumption demands, revealing uneven practices through online channels, and advocating initiatives such as sanitary pad mutual support projects to reduce economic burdens. In the end, the pink tax and quality issues in feminine products represent more general gendered inequality. They illustrate how practices in markets, customs in culture, and gaps in the rules intersect to take advantage of women both economically and socially. Addressing such issues isn't simply a question of equal prices or safer products, but rather addressing the systemic forces that render discrimination the norm. By encouraging better laws, better corporate conduct, and more aware consumers, societies may lower systemic exploitation and draw nearer to real gender equality.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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