

The Pink Tax

Ola Harb

Adnan Kassar School of Business, Lebanese American University, Lebanon

ABSTRACT: Gender issues prevail today in everyone's daily life. Both males and females face some sort of gender discrimination often, through media, communication, and education. However, existing stereotypes have created a huge gender gap where females generally receive less support than males academically, financially, and even physically. As a result, there exist many factors that might influence gender-related matters. This paper focuses on a fundamental concept which plays a prominent role in relation to women's independence on both the economic and health-related levels. The Pink tax concept is an additional fee that females are obliged to pay every day as consumers for goods and services that are comparable to similar or identical products for males. The aim of this paper is to explore ways in which the effects of Pink taxation on the societal, economic, and legal levels can be mitigated and alleviated. To achieve this goal, research and interviews were conducted for the purpose of exploring the level of awareness around the concept of the Pink tax among students at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, Lebanon. Findings suggested that awareness levels tend to lean towards the lower end of the spectrum among both sexes, denoting the dire need for educational and regulatory measures to be taken. As such, recommendations should highlight the importance of stipulating new governmental laws and regulations and amending existing ones, in addition to spreading awareness through gender-focused education with the support of non-governmental organizations.

Keywords—gender discrimination, Pink tax, stereotypes.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Pink tax is a gender – discriminatory fee which forces females to pay more than males on products that are similar or identical (Lafferty, 2019)^[1]. According to the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs (2015)^[2], women's products typically cost more than those targeted towards men's by an average of 7%. In fact, more than 85% of product categories examined showed higher prices for female than male consumers (NYC DCA, 2015). Moreover, this study revealed that women paid more 42% of the time, compared to a much lower percentage for males paying more (18%). It was also noted that only 40% of the time, both males and females would pay the same amount for a given product. In essence, gender gaps are prevalent everywhere nowadays, even among children (UNICEF, 2022)^[3]. For instance, in Lebanon, gender gaps are extremely wide, where the country ranks 145th out of 153 nations (World Economic Forum, 2020)^[4]. These alarming numbers continue to rise in light of the economic, political, and health-related situation of the country. According to ESCWA (2020)^[5], more than 55% of the Lebanese are now living in poverty after the economic collapse due to the October 2019 revolution and the Coronavirus pandemic which struck the country, especially after the Beirut Port blast. These factors have reflected negatively on the economic situation of the Lebanese, particularly women, given the pre-existing gender pay gap, where women earn, on average, between 16 – 19% less than men (Harb & Rouhana, 2020)^[6], and the employment rate of women is 43% less than that of men (UN Women, 2020)^[7]. Today, many women in Lebanon are unable to afford buying necessary products such as pads and tampons because they are deemed “unnecessary to subsidize” by the government (Ouass, 2022)^[8]. As a result, 76.45% of females are finding it even more difficult to access and buy period products because of higher prices and accessibility (Plan International, Fe-Male, 2021)^[9]. As per Fe-male (2020)^[10], prices of women's sanitary products have increased by 500%, leaving 66% of adolescent girls unable to afford menstrual products every month. What is also worth mentioning is period poverty in Lebanon is also affecting women who are Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon who have been facing problems with “extremely limited period management practices” (Nasreddine, 2022)^[11]. According to the Lebanese Law, there is no such tax which is legally stipulated, neither directly, nor indirectly, where women have to pay more than men on any product. However, the lack of monitoring and regulatory procedures has left sellers (retailers, pharmacies, manufacturers etc..) price as they wish, without suffering any consequences. As such, it is now clear that the concept of Pink taxation is resulting in a direct impact on the well-being of individuals in Lebanon, particularly females, who are now unable to afford products that they want, and more importantly, products that they need.

II. BODY

In order to derive tangible results to achieve the aim of this policy paper, 16 interviews were conducted on the concept of Pink taxation at the Lebanese American University in Lebanon, Beirut Campus, to understand the level of awareness around such a construct among university students from different social, economic, and educational backgrounds (YouTube, 2022)^[8]. The interviews included 8 males and 8 females who were inquired about their knowledge with respect to the topic. 4 questions were asked during the interviews:

1. *Do you know what a pink tax is? If not, can you try to guess?*
2. *Do you think it's only a women's issue or do you think it affects both males and females?*
3. *Why don't we find a lot of people talking about it often? Do you think it is because we have adapted to it and accepted it? Or is it because it's considered a taboo topic in Lebanon today?*
4. *What could be done to solve this issue in your opinion?*

For the first question, 62.5% of interviewees claimed they were unaware of the term "Pink tax" (10 out of 16 interviewees answered no). This implies a relatively low level of awareness in the community, especially among students at LAU, who are usually expected to acquire a higher level of knowledge on such topics given the gender-neutral environment that is fostering the mindset of enrolled individuals on gender-related issues, through the Title IX Office and the MEPI Tomorrow's Leaders scholarship (Haffar, 2022; Batakji, 2022)^[12].

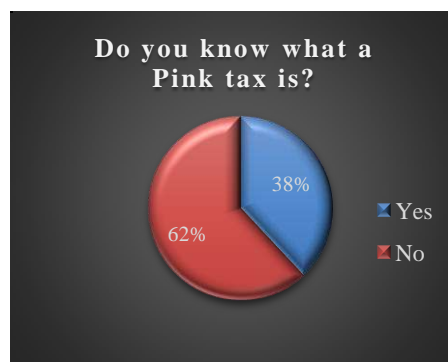


figure 1

The second question was answered differently by each interviewee, based on every individual's perspective on women's need for feminine products, such as deodorants, razors, and period commodities. The answers included 75% of people who thought that this issue affects both men and women (12 out of 16 interviewees answered with "both"), relating it back to the way income is mainly controlled by men in Lebanese households (UN Women, Mashreq Gender Facility, & World Bank Group, 2021)^[13]. On the other hand, people who believed Pink taxation only affected women stated that it is because women are those who require these products, and when they pay for them, it severely impacts their financial stability, given the gender pay gap which is already prevalent in the Lebanon and the MENA region, according to UN Women (2020)^[7].

The third question provided students with more space to express their viewpoints on the matter. Every interviewee elaborated on the different factors that come into play when this purely gender-based tax is implemented. Some mentioned financial interests of business owners, and political interests of the people in power, while others explained how culture plays a pivotal role in the way the Lebanese community handles such a controversial topic and treats it as "taboo", considering the underlying barriers that might hinder the ability of women to talk about the importance of such problems, and force them into tolerating the idea of paying more, despite being paid less.

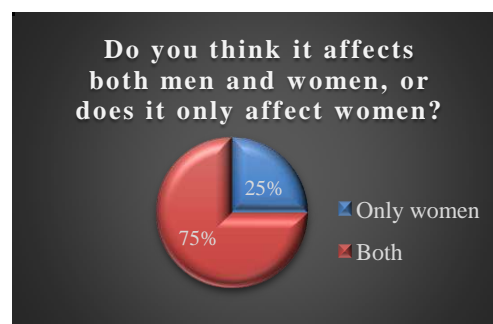


figure 2

The fourth question investigated ways in which this issue can be resolved, based on the interviewees' diverse perspectives. They suggested many recommendations on the legal, economic, and educational levels. Students proposed that the law must be enforced in a better manner in order to regulate price disparities, and the gender pay gap must be resolved in correspondence with international laws and conventions (such as CEDAW^[14]). Moreover, 5 out of 16 students emphasized the importance of raising awareness on the topic, taking into account the lack of knowledge and information about Pink taxation within the community.

Furthermore, director of the Title IX office, Dr. Jennifer Skulte-Ouaiss, was also interviewed to understand how gender affects economy and culture, based on her extensive experience in the field. The following questions were addressed during the interview with Dr. Ouaiss:

1. *What do you think is the main reason behind the existence of Pink taxation in Lebanon today?*
2. *Do you think it affects only women or does it affect both genders?*
3. *How has the economic crisis that we are currently experiencing worsened the impact of the Pink tax on people in Lebanon?*
4. *We interviewed multiple students here at LAU to understand the level of awareness on the topic, and we realized that the majority of interviewees barely had any knowledge about the concept of Pink taxation. What, in your opinion, is the main reason behind this reality today?*

In the interview, she correlated political under-representation of women in Lebanon with the idea of Pink taxation, stating that regulation was only being taken into account from a masculine perspective, and gave an example on how, when the Lebanese economic crisis began, men-targeted products which were not necessary were subsidized over a table of only male authorities, and how menstrual products, which are a necessity for menstruating individuals, were not (Ouaiss, 2022)^[8].

There are many factors that contribute to the existence of this problem. To begin with, the pink tax is not a governmental tax. It's solely based on gender. Thus, the government and its concerned bodies play a prominent role in enforcing regulations on such pricing strategies. As such, political misrepresentation of women in general, and on the scale of the Lebanese government in particular, is an important factor when it comes to allowing such a price disparity to occur (Nassif, 2020)^[15]. This leads to products being sold at unreasonable prices regardless of the financial ability of the individual buying, so it creates an endless loop of overpricing, inflation, and economic collapse, on both the household and institutional levels.

In addition, an inspection of market prices was performed through examining some products' prices in stores and supermarkets located in Beirut, such as COOP, Smiles, and Spinneys. The findings showed a huge discrepancy between similar and/or identical products targeted to each gender. The pricing strategies used resulted in a 79.3% markup on the same brand, size, and type of deodorant targeted for each gender group, and a 140% markup on razors of the same brand but which were colored differently.

Recommendations



figure 3



figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Given the findings of the interviews conducted, it is now evident that the root of the problem lies within governmental policies and legislations. The fact that this concept is intertwined with every gender issue on many different levels should be acknowledged. As such, it is recommended that laws be implemented by the Ministry of Economy to impose strict regulatory policies on pricing strategies, particularly for "pink-coded" products.

Furthermore, given that period poverty is an effect of pink taxation, a potential recommendation could lie in the idea that period products, such as pads and tampons, be provided by non-governmental organizations

such as Kafa, Fe-Male, and Dawrati to women in need. This initiative can also be implemented in collaboration with educational institutions such as universities and high schools, starting from LAU. For instance, the Student Council body can contribute by sending the message of how important it is to provide female students with menstrual products whenever they need them (i.e., in bathrooms, at the Health office, etc.).

On the educational level, gender programs and courses could be integrated within the curricula of schools, universities, and vocational institutes in order to spread awareness on the topic, especially for the new generations, in order to embed the idea of gender equity with respect to financial independence, political freedom and representation, and social construction. An already existing example is the MEPI TLS Gender Scholarship program being implemented at AUB and LAU currently, which offers students the opportunity to learn about gender issues, and unlearn social and cultural stereotypes which are prominent factors that affect the way individuals perceive gender concepts (U.S. Department of State, 2022)^{[16]affair}. As such, the idea of educating the youth on gender matters could be a valid recommendation to resolve the issue of gender discrimination, including the concept of Pink taxation on a micro-level.

On the institutional level, private companies such as razor manufacturers (Gillette, Venus, and Bic) and period product manufacturers (Sanita Private, Always, Nana, Kotex, and Carefree) could be targeted in order to enforce regulatory policies for equal and fair pricing of such products.

III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, gender equality and equity are not easy goals that can be achieved overnight, but it is imperative to take such policies into consideration, in order to deconstruct what has been a social construct for decades in the Lebanese patriarchal community specifically. As such, the concept of Pink taxation must be eliminated through legal, economic, and educational initiatives that aim to spread awareness and discipline among both consumers and providers. Furthermore, the significance of other factors that impact buying power and accessibility, such as the gender pay gap, the cultural barriers that might exist, and the legal implications that contribute to this problem are prominent aspects that must be addressed and taken into account while implementing this policy.

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