

Toy stores charge girls more

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The Washington Post

Radio Flyer sells a red scooter for boys and a pink scooter for girls. Target listed one for \$24.99 and the other for \$49.99.

The scooters' price gap isn't an anomaly. The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs compared nearly 800 products with female and male versions — meaning they were practically identical except for the gender-specific packaging — and uncovered a persistent surcharge for one of the sexes. Controlling for quality, items marketed to girls and women cost an average 7 percent more than similar products aimed at boys and men.

DCA Commissioner Julie Menin says the numbers show an insidious form of gender discrimination. Compounding the injustice, she said, is the wage gap. Federal data show U.S. women earn about 79 cents for every dollar paid to men.

"It's a double whammy," Menin said, "and it's not just happening in New York."

A Target spokesperson said the company lowered the price of the pink scooter after the report was released Friday, calling the discrepancy a "system error." (The retailer blamed the same kind of glitch last year after catching heat for selling black Barbies at more than double the price of white Barbies.)

Researchers for the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs pored over toys, children's clothing, adult apparel, personal care products and home goods sold in the city. The largest price discrepancy emerged in the hair care

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category: Women, on average, paid 48 percent more for goods like shampoo, conditioner and gel. Razor cartridges came in second place, costing female shoppers 11 percent more.

Boosting prices according to who's buying is nothing new. Hairdressers often charge women more. Nightclubs sometimes demand more cash from men for admission.

Price discrimination on the whole tends to be worse for women, though. A 1994 report from the state of California found they pay an annual "gender tax" of \$1,351 for the same services rendered to men.

The pricing differences extend beyond basic services and goods. Until courts knocked the practice down, insurance companies in Europe charged women more because women live longer. Under the Affordable Care Act, insurance companies in



MARVIN JOSEPH/WASHINGTON POST

Lizzy Antwi, 8, checks out a set of toy Power Rangers at a store in Alexandria, Va.

the United States cannot factor gender into cost.

That doesn't mean local companies always follow the rules. DCA inspectors issued 129 violations for gender pricing of services this year, compared to 118 in 2014.

Companies might be exploiting the idea that female shoppers are willing to spend more money than their male counterparts, said economist Ian Ayres.

Of course, a woman's sweater might be crafted with nicer fabrics. A man's sweater might be stitched with cheaper polyester. But that often isn't the case. Frequently, the only difference between two products is color.

"Those prices aren't being driven by costs," said Ayres, "but just because you take advantage of certain groups but not others."