

Can femtech close the gender health gap?

Historically, medicine has largely neglected female anatomy. As a result, the functioning of the female body, in part, remains a mystery in both the scientific world as well as for women themselves.

But with technological advancements and the women's rights movement gaining prominence over the last decades, startups have taken it upon themselves to minimise this gap.

With men acting as the gatekeepers to medical research for most of history, conditions exclusively affecting women, such as *endometriosis*, have been chronically underfunded. Females have also been largely excluded from both *animal* and human trials. It is only since the 1990s that women's participation in US clinical trials, a frontrunner in medical research, is required.

Prior to that, female hormonal fluctuations have been used as an excuse to omit them from taking part. This gender research bias has resulted in the development of medicine that is more effective on men and a lack of understanding of symptoms that are predominantly experienced by women.

The lack of female participants in clinical trials has proven so detrimental that, in 2005, eight out of ten prescription drugs were withdrawn from the US market due to women's health issues.

Despite cardiovascular disease being the leading cause of death in women worldwide, only a *third of participants* in research trials for heart drugs are

women. This results in reduced awareness of symptoms unique to women, such as indigestion and back pain, further contributing to fewer women receiving a diagnosis of heart disease in comparison to men. This gender healthcare research bias has fatal consequences.

Startups addressing the issue

There is an urgent need to close this gap and in recent years an effort has been made by both the scientific, entrepreneurial and investment communities. Femtech achieved a milestone in 2021, raising over \$1B from global VCs for the first time since the term was coined in 2016.

Among the startups aiming to eliminate the gender health gap is Bloomer Tech. The company is leveraging technological advancements by embedding sensors into female undergarments, collecting biometric data concerning the cardiovascular disease. The connected app informs users about key metrics such as *pulse rates, respiratory rates and heart rhythm*, which they can choose to share with their doctors. This spike in female cardiovascular disease data will provide the medical community with deeper insights into the condition and empower women by giving them insights into their bodies.

Other startups, such as the app Wild.AI, have likewise spotted a vast opportunity as technology increasingly provides a democratised way to collect data on women, for women.

Wild.AI has utilised technology by collecting data on one of the most fundamental biological factors affecting a woman's life: her menstrual cycle. The data is used to create an optimised training plan for users, providing women with the tools and knowledge to work with their periods and not against it. Likewise, professional athletes also tailor their training schedules to menstrual cycles to enhance performance and reduce injury rates.

"There is this massive gap in the market for female technology," says Helene Guillaume, founder and CEO of Wild.AI, who is pioneering in the femtech industry by applying her data science and AI skillset to create a tailored training plan for her users.

"We have done extensive research [...] and we translate that research into our app, helping women eat, exercise and recover with their fertility, whether they menstruate, use birth control or are in perimenopause or menopause," says Helene.

Wild.AI and Bloomer Tech are quite different products, but a key commonality is that they both harness the power of tech and data to empower women by shedding light on how their body functions.

The global market for woman's health therapeutics is estimated to grow from \$54.4B in 2021 to \$70.8B by 2026.

In a society that has been lacking medical research, information and products in this area for centuries, this is refreshing and encouraging. Having said that, there is still a long way to go to close the gender health gap.

"It's very true that there is less funding in female health," stresses Helene.

With women representing half of the planet's population and gradually gaining more education opportunities and financial independence across the world, the woman's health industry is destined to continue to grow, welcome new players and ease the lives of countless women.

Article by DARIA CONNOLLY