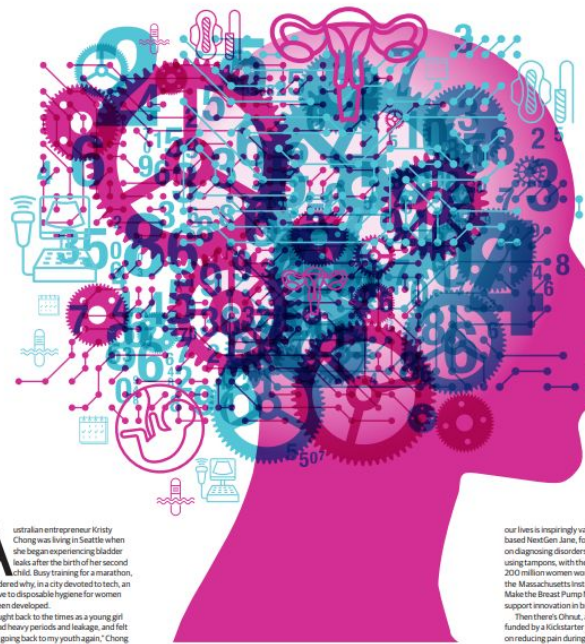


# The rise of FEMTECH

From diagnostic tampons to silent breast pumps, Rosie Mullender looks at the rise of technology designed with women's bodies in mind



Australian entrepreneur Kristy Chong was living in Seattle when she began experiencing bladder leaks after the birth of her second child. Busy training for a marathon, she wondered why, in a city devoted to tech, an alternative to disposable hygiene for women hadn't been developed.

"I thought back to the times as a young girl when I had heavy periods and leakage, and felt like I was going back to my youth again," Chong says. "Here I was, surrounded by tech brands, and there was no solution. I thought, 'Why can't my underwear support me?' Maybe it was time to develop a better solution—one that was a bit more high-tech and environmentally friendly."

So she launched Modibodi, reusable period pants that replace the need for disposable hygiene. To reach any woman who'd, period would say, "Where have you been all my life?"

Chong is part of a new generation of female entrepreneurs working in femtech, creating technologies that are focused on improving women's health and address everything from menopause to pregnancy. As a world generally designed by and for men,

it's no surprise that this kind of technology is lagging behind—despite the global women's health market being valued at over \$68 billion. In her book *Invisible Women*, activist Caroline Criado Perez details the myriad ways women's health can suffer due to the disparity—like the average office is five degrees too cold for women because the standard temperature was based on the needs of a middle-aged male; women's heart attacks are more likely to go undiagnosed, and the effects of alcohol on 'female Viagra' were tested on mostly male subjects.

According to Chong, while there may be funding for femtech, a lot of would-be entrepreneurs don't know what's out there. "I went through an Australian program called Springboard, which is focused on tech, and that changed my outlook on what my company could be—and I think that's what more women need to be looking to do," she says. "I think it's about educating women, especially mums who have unique ideas."

## Meet the innovators

If the opportunities out there are taken, the potential for femtech entrepreneurs to change

our lives is inspiringly vast in scope. California-based NextGen Jane, for example, is working on diagnosing disorders such as endometriosis using tampons, with the potential to help 200 million women worldwide. Meanwhile, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Make the Breast Pump Not Suck project aims to support innovation in breastfeeding tech.

Then there's Ohmz, a stretchy wearable funded by a Kickstarter project, which focuses on reducing pain during sex, one of a slew of products that aim to increase women's sexual pleasure.

With an average of five times as many studies being conducted into erectile dysfunction as PMS, the developments represent a very welcome shift in focus.

Iida Tin, who is credited with coining the word 'femtech,' is the CEO and co-founder of period-tracking app Clue. The app allows women to record physical and emotional cues as well as track their cycles, joining a number of femtech products designed to help women understand their bodies better.

"When women understand their bodies, they can better navigate the world," Tin says.

"The more we learn about our period, the more we understand it's a health cycle—for instance, we react differently to infection in different parts of our cycle. It's a steering tool to help us navigate life better so we can live fuller lives. And when people live freely and well with their biology and body, that gives them strength and a voice."



**"There needs to be more female entrepreneurs addressing the taboo subjects women have faced over the years—I hope men can be by their side as they do it"**

—Modibodi founder Kristy Chong

## Taking on a male world

But despite the huge advantages femtech can offer to women, Tin is acutely aware of the hurdles female entrepreneurs face when trying to attract investors. Discussing leakage, breastfeeding and PMS with panels of mostly male venture capitalists can be a hard sell. "They don't even understand they have a blind spot—they're not humble enough to research what they don't understand," she says.

"There's a whole part of female existence they have to listen really hard to in order to

understand it. Once someone has really explained, and they've really listened, they can be sympathetic, care about it and fight for it. But it's often a process. I get so many young femtech entrepreneurs coming to talk to me, and I see their innovation, energy and ideas. But many of them are struggling for funding—if there was more support, we'd see much more innovation."

Despite these hurdles, Tin agrees with Chong that women need the confidence to make the most of this new world of opportunity. "I think the biggest hurdles are ourselves," she says.

"I speak with so many women who say: 'I have this idea,' then they start listing all the reasons they're not quite ready to start: 'I need more education, to do more research, to find a co-founder...' But I think that's a fallacy. You'll never be ready, you'll never know enough. You need to start! And that's about courage, conviction and belief. Build a company yourself and you can create your own rules. Women need to trust in themselves."

In the US, women make 80 per cent of buying decisions when it comes to health care—

while in the industry, just 13 per cent of CEOs are female. But although it can be challenging for women to get their voices heard in the femtech space, it isn't impossible. And, Chong says, the rest of the world is rapidly catching up.

"In the past six years I've seen massive change," she says. "Women are coming together to make a noise about equality in all areas, and we're seeing the men change as well—they're coming along on the journey, whether they like it or not. There needs to be more female entrepreneurs addressing the taboo subjects women have faced over the years—and I hope men can be by their side, be supportive and stand by women as they do it."

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## ONES TO WATCH

Here are three key players you can expect big things from in the femtech arena

### The IVF app



**Bonzun**  
Founded by Bonnie Roupé, the app supports women through

IVF as well as pregnancy. The app can store test results, track symptoms and send reminders to take medication, for a smoother IVF journey.

### The new menopause treatment



**KaNDy Therapeutics**  
Co-founded and run by Dr Mary Kerr, the company is developing an alternative to treat symptoms of menopause by targeting the central nervous system, as opposed to the traditional hormone-replacement therapy. Its work on reducing hot flashes and night wakings looks promising—the results of its latest study are due in late 2019.

### The silent breast pump

#### Elvie

The brainchild of Tania Boler, Elvie's silent, wearable breast pump is a welcome innovation in a still-taboo area of women's health. Elvie also has an award-winning pelvic-floor trainer, for post-pregnancy support and enhanced intimacy.

