

The case for men in femtech

The last few weeks have seen the femtech community divided. After the shockwaves of Flo Health's unicorn status - an industry first - founders, investors and experts have weighed in.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Many applaud the announcement, echoing the *sentiment of the Financial Times* that this is the sign that femtech as an industry is 'taking off'. That this will make investors finally see the impact of women's health and loosen the purse strings for female founders. Others haven't responded quite so magnanimously. Some have taken this as a premonition of a future where female founders will be overlooked, whilst their male counterparts' line their own pockets creating solutions for bodies they don't understand.

'Why should men represent women's health?' is one of the main lines of questioning which made the rounds on my algorithm. 'Fund female founders' is another. Across the spectrum, there is a rallying cry for women, which I support wholeheartedly. However, the longer I sat glued to my LinkedIn feed, the more I began to wonder about a concerning underlying narrative. My worry lies not in the call to action to support female founders. Far from it. To any investors reading this, please, *do this*. Pitchbook data found that women accounted for just 2% or less of VC funding in 2023. This has to change. Studies have found that women-led businesses generate higher revenue, create more jobs, stimulate more economic growth and offer better working culture than their male-led counterparts. Funding female founders is a win for everyone. However, over the last week I've found myself feeling increasingly estranged from the narrative that men shouldn't be part of women's health, and asking

myself what this says about the future of the femtech ecosystem.

One of femtech's core missions is education. If that weren't the case, we wouldn't be shouting from the rafters about the Flo Health news (gladly or madly), because women's health would already be a priority. If there weren't a gender health gap to close, we would already have data and research, because women would have been included in clinical trials long before 1993. This isn't a utopian ideal; this is entirely possible. But part of this progress is the need to educate men. From a young age, education needs to bring boys into the fold of conversations about women's bodies and health. Not just to improve women's healthcare, but to effect a larger cultural shift from misogyny to equality. To make men our allies, instead of our rivals at best, and at worst, a threat to our safety. Granted, this will require long-term global commitment. But this is vital to making women's health and safety a priority in the future.

Language plays a key role in this evolution. Take swearing, for instance. The number of commonly-used words relating to the female anatomy used in a derogatory way far outnumber those relating to male bodies. This common parlance feeds into the collective psyche and reinforces gender biases - in the workplace, in social settings and in relationships. It's likely one of the underlying reasons female founders face such difficulties securing funding, a traditionally male-dominated environment. The goal here isn't to drive the wedge deeper between sexes, but rather to illustrate the point that the equality at the heart of femtech can't be achieved through misandry, in the same way that misogyny is responsible for the prejudices women fight daily.

Even though there have been salient points filtering through my LinkedIn feed since the news broke, the anger directed at the Gurski brothers has taken me aback. One of the main sources of ire was the suggestion that the brothers' interest in women's health is commercial and disingenuous.



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We need to fund female founders, to make sure that solutions are offered by people who understand the issues, and that female founders are rewarded in every sense for the positive change they facilitate. However, I don't believe eschewing men completely is the answer. Just as there are, for example, female founders providing solutions for male infertility, there are male founders in femtech whose mission stems from wanting to provide solutions for their mothers, sisters, daughters, wives and partners. Who perform allyship in their daily work tackling issues that affect women such as PMDD, prolapse and endometriosis. Who have senior teams comprising intelligent women. Who are conscious of the nuance of being a male founder in the space, and take care to navigate that experience with respect and empathy. Do their solutions deserve less attention and less funding than those created by women?

These men are part of the mission, as allies and brothers in arms, with the responsibility of supporting female founders. Driving them away and creating a hermetic ecosystem which only accepts women won't change the state of play for female founders, or bring us closer to closing the

gender health gap. It will turn the movement into an exclusionary faction, keeping it sitting squarely within a niche. This will also have ripples in the investment landscape, making conversations with male VCs even more scarce, and giving female founders a harder sell to prove the benefits of their solutions to an audience that is kept at arm's length.

Yes, we have a *funding issue in femtech*. We need more women to hold the purse strings, and more men to fund female founders. Yes, we have cultural issues in femtech, particularly in communities where discussions of women's health, wellness, pleasure and bodies remain stigmatised by strict paternalistic tradition. But these problems won't be solved by excluding men. This is the very reason that we need to give them a seat at the table: education. That isn't to say that male-founded or co-founded femtech businesses should have the monopoly or speak on behalf of women, far from it. But if femtech isn't educating those who have historically held all the chips then it is creating narrow echo chambers that don't accomplish the long-term shifts we need: to funding, to healthcare, and to patriarchal views of women.

Grace Tucker is a women's health communications specialist and Director at *Media Foundry*.



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Article by Grace Tucker