

Token gestures won't cut it. Women's health needs real innovation

Nuria Antoja, 12th June 2025

While public discourse and media attention around women's health issues have grown in recent years, the gender health gap remains a pressing inequality within our society. We're still not at a point where women can readily access empathetic advice and expertise without feeling dismissed, or be able to speak openly without stigma. Resources and support are too often non-existent or limited, whether that be at work, school or on social media. From periods and menopause to bladder weakness and fertility, sadly, many women still navigate these life experiences feeling unsupported and alone.

There is an opportunity for leading brands and retailers to collectively smash these taboos, be loud and proud about women's health, and facilitate easy access to education, resources and impactful products that can improve lives. And in doing so together, we can influence and advocate for equality with those who have the power to deliver it.

But it has to be genuine, and it has to be impactful. Token gestures won't cut it. Achieving real change demands taking risks and potentially upsetting a few people along the way. It needs collaboration with experts and with brands who are connected and trusted by those who use them, or maybe even collectively as a group with your competitors. It requires innovation grounded in women's health needs. And most importantly, it fundamentally requires investment.

At Essity, we've been putting our money where our mouth is. We've taken risks and upset people all in the name of pushing boundaries in support of those who we know need our backing. Bodyform, one of our period brands, became the first brand to show blood and depict menstrual bleeding in advertising, sparking important conversations and normalising periods.

We've collaborated with experts, and yes, even our competitors. In 2023, we co-founded the Period Equity Alliance, a group of charities and education institutions dedicated to ensuring everyone can access

the products and education they need so no one is held back by their period. In recent years, we've collaborated regularly with our competitors in partnership with In Kind Direct and Tesco to deliver an in-store mechanic that has donated millions of essential hygiene and health products to those most in need. And in the last month, Essity has spearheaded a campaign in collaboration with CensHERship calling for social media companies to end the unnecessary censorship of women's health content on their platforms.

We've innovated through our development of reusable period underwear and reusable continence underwear, becoming the global leader in this area. Or through our dedicated menopause brand Issviva, which began as a direct-to-consumer business in 2023 and now has its range of impactful products listed nationally with Tesco.

And we've invested by quietly donating a minimum of 100,000 period products a month to charity In Kind Direct since June 2017, now topping over 10m donations. And through Essity Ventures, we're backing early-stage women's health innovations such as UK start-up Monthlies – because we believe that accelerating progress means nurturing the emerging ideas of others as well as advancing our own.

And all of this isn't only just good for society – it's good for business. Through brands like Bodyform, we've seen that doing the right thing can also build stronger, more resilient consumer relationships. Purpose-led strategies that respond to real unmet needs don't just strengthen brand affinity - they create lasting impact.

Of course, no one organisation or initiative can close the gender health gap alone. It's a systemic issue that requires alignment across government, business, retail and wider society. Alongside greater awareness, we need sustained commitment, cross-sector collaboration and the courage to challenge outdated norms.

Nevertheless, brands like ours have a powerful role to play. By listening more closely, responding more meaningfully, and partnering more widely, we can move from a system that sidelines women's health to one that puts it at the centre of public and commercial life.

When women's health is neglected, everyone loses. It's time it was prioritised - not as an add-on, but as a cornerstone of a fairer, healthier society.

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