

Women's Health Surge in APAC

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The rising burden of diseases such as ovarian cancer, breast cancer, cervical cancer, infertility, etc. is emerging as the key driver of the women's healthcare market across the globe. While North America led the women healthcare market in 2025, Asia Pacific (APAC) is expected to witness the fastest growth this year onwards. As a result, governments across the APAC region, are recognising the importance of women's health and are launching initiatives, particularly under female leaders, to improve access to healthcare services. Moreover, a number of women-led startups are now developing new solutions to address this growing burden of women-associated diseases in the APAC region. Let's take a closer look.



According to reports, the Asia Pacific (APAC) region is facing a significant challenge with cancer rates, particularly breast and cervical cancer. In 2026, the region is expected to continue its trend of rising cancer cases, with breast cancer accounting for 45 per cent of global cases and cervical cancer accounting for 58 per cent of global deaths. This alarming statistic highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address women's healthcare.

In this regard, China has recently taken a historic step to protect women's health with the introduction of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine into the national immunisation programme. Alongside, the Hong Kong government has recently launched the Phase II of the Breast Cancer Screening Pilot Programme in the country, that provides subsidised screening services to women who are at high risk of developing breast cancer, with a view to enhancing recovery rates through early detection and treatment. The initiative is being led by Dr Anne Chee, Head, Centre for Health Protection- Non-Communicable Disease Branch.

With a major focus on women's health, Hong Kong organised its first global summit in 2025 to address a broad spectrum of critical concerns in women's wellness, including women's longevity, disease prevention, and workplace wellness. A major highlight of the summit was the global launch of the Women's Longevity Blueprint, a pioneering initiative aimed at offering tools and strategies to help women prevent disease and enhance health.

On the other hand, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) has renewed its commitment to eliminating cervical cancer, by launching 'The Roadmap to Accelerate Cervical Cancer Elimination in APEC Economies 2026–2030' during a meeting in Seoul, South Korea, in October 2025. This initiative is well supported by Jeong Eun-kyeong, the first woman to serve as the Minister of Health and Welfare in South Korea, having taken office in 2025.

"Regardless of the recent advances and efforts, we lose one woman every 90 seconds to cervical cancer, 90 per cent of whom live in low-income countries. Although some countries are well on their way to reach the WHO strategy on elimination of cervical cancer, reaching 90-70-90 target, where 90 per cent of the girls are fully vaccinated with the HPV vaccine by the age of 15, 70 per cent of women are screened at least once in their lifetime by the age of 35 and possibly again by the age of 45 using a high-performance test (e.g. HPV test) and 90 per cent of women with precancerous or cancerous lesion are treated and managed by 2030, other countries are lagging behind. To achieve this goal, more efforts need to be made to facilitate the introduction of HPV vaccination in national programmes in low and middle income countries (LMIC)", said **Dr Anja Ostrbenk from University of Ljubljana, Slovenia**.

With a focus on breast cancer, South Korea-based MAILab has collaborated with the Department of Radiology at Seoul Asan Hospital to develop an artificial intelligence (AI) algorithm for breast cancer diagnosis. This project holds special significance because it is being led by female experts. Dr Yeonjin Jang, Chief Medical Officer (CMO) of MAILab, and Professor Hakhee Kim from the Department of Radiology at Seoul Asan Hospital, along with other female medical and AI specialists, are spearheading the research.

Novel solutions are also being built by female entrepreneurs in Australia to address major health concerns associated with women. For instance, BCAL Diagnostics, co-founded by Jayne Shaw, is all set to launch a diagnostic test for ovarian cancer detection initially targeting women with familial or genetic risk factors, including BRCA mutation carriers and those with a strong family history of breast or ovarian cancer.

Further, University of Sydney has marked the formalisation of its relationship with the Timor-Leste Ministry of Health, recognising the success of a landmark cervical cancer elimination programme and committing to ongoing support for women's health in Timor-Leste. Under the guidance of a female leader, Dr Elizabeth Leto Mau, Director General of Primary Health Care in the Timor-Leste Ministry of Health, University of Sydney will support the delivery of the Elimination Partnership in the Indo-Pacific for Cervical Cancer (EPICC) programme in Timor-Leste.

Taking a look at Singapore, Aura Fem Health, a startup dedicated to improving women's healthcare, has recently secured \$200,000 investment for bridging gaps in women's healthcare by considering not only physical health but also mental and environmental well-being.

Further, KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) Maternal and Child Health Research Institute (MCHRI) has launched Singapore's first set of *Guidelines on Management of the Menopause Transition* this year. Unveiled by Sim Ann, Senior Minister of State for Home Affairs & Foreign Affairs and Adviser, People's Association Women's Integration Network Council, the guidelines provide a framework to standardise care for this important stage of women's health.

According to **Rukshini Puvanendran, Co-Director, KK Menopause Centre and Head and Senior Consultant, Family Medicine Service, KKH**, "Despite its significant impact on long-term health and quality of life, menopause transition remains one of the most overlooked phases in a woman's life. It is often under addressed within healthcare settings where clinical approaches can be inconsistent. By establishing a clear, evidence-based framework, we have to put the necessary systems in place to ensure that menopause is recognised as a priority."

In India, both public and private sectors, under female leadership, are ramping up efforts to develop new therapies and diagnostics solutions for early detection and better treatment of women-based cancers such as breast cancer, ovarian and cervical cancer.

For example, on one hand, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has funded a new national clinical trial aimed at improving access to high-cost targeted cancer therapies for women, with the official launch of the IPIROC study by the Kolkata Gynaecological Oncology Trials and Translational Research (KOLGOTRG), while on the other, women-led biotech startups are developing products such as CERVICHECK, India's first CDSCO approved at-home, self-sampling kit for cervical cancer screening; and CanScan to screen for breast cancer using a breath sample, to name a few.

Joining this list is Indonesia, where the Health Ministry, under the guidance of Lucia Rizka Andalusia, Ministry's Director General of Pharmacy and Medical Devices, is pursuing the development of artificial intelligence (AI)-guided ultrasound devices to increase detection accuracy and thereby, reduce cases of breast cancer as well as maternal and infant deaths.

While in New Zealand, Dr Alicia Didsbury at the University of Auckland is leading the research on developing a new test for women with ovarian cancer. The research team hopes to develop a more affordable test that is widely available through the public health system.

Challenges persist

Although many solutions are being built by both the public and private sectors across the Asia Pacific region, accessibility and affordability still remain the major challenges for many women. Also, cultural taboos around discussing reproductive and breast health remain significant barriers in parts of South Asia and the Pacific Islands.

Further, awareness of human papillomavirus (HPV) as a causative agent of cervical cancer is limited in many populations, despite strong global advocacy under the World Health Organization Cervical Cancer Elimination Initiative. Misinformation surrounding HPV vaccination further complicates early prevention strategies.

From the diagnostics perspective, many countries in South and Southeast Asia face stark disparities between urban and rural healthcare infrastructure. While metropolitan areas may offer mammography and HPV testing, rural regions often rely on visual inspection methods or lack organised screening entirely.

Breast cancer detection often relies on mammography, which requires costly equipment and maintenance. In many rural settings, equipment is either outdated or at times non-functional. For cervical cancer, HPV DNA testing is more effective than Pap smears but requires laboratory infrastructure that is not universally available.

Also, in lower-middle-income countries, cancer screening is often deprioritised compared to infectious diseases or maternal health. Although global support from organisations such as Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance has improved HPV vaccine access, scaling up national screening infrastructure remains financially challenging.

According to **Gauri Navalkar Godse, Director and CEO-India, UE LifeSciences**, "Asia presents a diverse and complex healthcare landscape. In countries like India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, rural populations still face challenges in accessing even basic diagnostic services. The prevalence of late-stage detection in these regions is high, and survival rates are correspondingly low. For breast and cervical cancers, which can be effectively managed if detected early, the lack of early screening is a major contributor to mortality. Portable screening devices are uniquely suited to address this challenge. Compact, easy-to-use, and powered by battery or mobile technologies, these tools can be deployed outside of traditional hospital settings. Accurate and affordable cancer screening, delivered through portable devices, is a cornerstone of a healthier future for women in Asia."

Sharing her opinion, **Dr Elizaveta Padalko, a specialist in clinical virology and infectious disease diagnostics, University Hospital Ghent, Belgium** said "Currently, a very important global challenge is the estimated lack of the sufficient number of tests suitable for the primary HPV screening. At the first sight it may sound strange as there are many diagnostic tests on the global market but the majority of the commercially available tests are not clinically validated according to the international criteria for use in primary cervical cancer screening. Thus, there is a real need for speeding up the clinical validation of the tests."

With targeted interventions and sustained commitment, the APAC region must strengthen its focus to significantly move closer to fight the women's health issues in years to come, by addressing the current challenges. This International Women's Day, celebrated across the globe on March 8, is an important reminder to adopt new strategies and build a better future for our women!

Vrushti Kothari

(vrushti.kothari@mmactiv.com)