

## Female condoms, an emerging market in India

Indian women are gradually waking up to the fact that their sexual health is in their own hands - if the sale of female condoms is anything to go by.

'The market for female condoms is just beginning to develop,' said M. Ayyappan, chairman and managing director, Hindustan Latex Ltd (HLL), a state-run condom manufacturer and so far the only player in this market, told IANS.

'Currently, the male condom market in India is to the tune of two billion pieces annually, and we are expecting the female condom category to attain at least three percent of that in the next three years.'

According to health experts, the need for female condoms had always been felt, especially among sex workers for whom it is not just a way to ward off sexually transmitted diseases but also a tool of empowerment.

HLL recently launched a new type of female condom, Velvet, a more cost effective product than its predecessor Confidom, which is for the premium segment. One pack of Velvet costs Rs.100 and contains three pieces and Confidom costs Rs.250 consisting of two pieces.

Velvet is manufactured in HLL's plant in Kerala. It is made of a material called Nitrile, which is provided by its US-based partner Female Health Company.

'The distribution channel for Velvet is the regular medical stores and modern trade outlets (like superstores). We are also in the process of installing female condom vending machines at high-end hotels to dispense the condoms,' said Ayyappan.

'The product will soon be available through e-commerce at getcloser.in website and other e-portals. Confidom is already available through e-commerce.'

In the first year of launch, the company expects to sell 1.5 million packets of Velvet.

HLL has a sales target of about Rs.5 billion by financial year 2008-09, of which about 8-10 percent is expected to be contributed by the female condom segment. It aims to achieve a turnover of Rs.10 billion by 2010.

The company, which posted a turnover of Rs.2.44 billion, exports its products to over 70 countries around the world. It is also exploring the option of exporting Velvet.

Narendra Malhotra, president, Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecological Society of India and Family Planning Association of India (FOGSI), said: 'The unmet need of female condoms in India is huge and if marketed properly this may become the fastest and hottest selling method. The potential is huge.'

'And looking at its business potential, a lot of private players are expected to come into the market,' Malhotra added.

Agrees Ayyappan, who says: 'Currently we are the only company marketing the product. But we do

expect private firms to get into the category and any amount of competition is always good for the consumer and the category.'

'More options being available will only increase the prevalence rate of contraceptives.'

HLL is also working extensively in six states - Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka and West Bengal - to increase awareness of female condoms.

'Any new contraceptive choice takes a few years to gain complete acceptance among the masses,' said Rajeev Kumar, product manager (consumer business division), HLL.

'Today, a significant section of Indian women are financially free. Earlier, the woman had to depend on the man for using condoms. Female condom provides an increased option of contraception and gives a choice to the woman,' Kumar added.

But still a lot needs to be done as far as awareness and acceptance of the products is concerned.

'Even though it is picking up, awareness about female condoms has not yet gained as much popularity, especially among women from the higher social strata,' said Ayyappan.

*Nayanima Basu* ( © IANS / India eNews)