

Online Marketing of Toxic Skin Lighteners

Mercury cosmetics marketed
as a 'solution' to dark skin



Executive Summary

October 2023

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The Minamata Convention on Mercury is a multilateral environmental agreement that addresses specific human activities that contribute to widespread mercury pollution. The Convention, as well as many national governments, bans the manufacture, import, and export of cosmetics with mercury content above 1ppm. However, searches of online platforms for suspect mercury-added skin lightening products (SLPs)—once sold primarily in local informal markets and beauty stores—have demonstrated that offerings and sales of SLPs have exploded globally and online. The latest Zero Mercury Working Group (ZMWG) investigation of suspect SLPs confirms yet again that mercury-added SLPs are still widely available around the world.

Preventing the production, trade, advertising and sale of mercury-added SLPs remains a significant challenge for public health institutions. Coupled with that, awareness of health risks from mercury-added SLPs is wholly inadequate to motivate the change needed globally. To effectively combat these SLPs, a coordinated interagency and international approach is needed to enact laws, enhance enforcement and promote awareness, without which mercury-added SLP sales will persist into the foreseeable future. Importantly, the continued growth of the SLP industry increases the risk to human health and the environment, while other mercury-added product categories are being phased out.

Mercury in skin lightening products and related risks

This is the fourth global report by the Zero Mercury Working Group (ZMWG) since 2017 on market surveillance of suspect SLPs. Since then, in collaboration with our NGO partners, we have analysed over 1000 SLPs from over 40 online platforms worldwide. Our global database is available on our website and is also accessible on the UNEP Global Mercury Partnership website.

The body of research confirms that SLPs are most often used by people of color. While people of all genders may use SLPs, women and girls are particularly vulnerable due to social pressure and conditioning to use these products. Targeted advertising, social media and peer pressure can push individuals to embrace Eurocentric beauty standards that favor "fairer" (i.e., lighter) skin. These beauty standards not only cause societal and psychological harm to the consumer's health and wellbeing but, due to the prevalence of mercury and other harmful chemicals in many SLPs, they present serious health risks, not only to the user, but also to those living in the same dwelling due to physical contact as well as mercury's ability to easily vaporize and spread within the home.

Due to its melanin-suppression activity which lightens the skin, mercury has also been used in other skincare products to treat age spots, freckles and blemishes. However, regular use of mercury-added SLPs reduces the skin's resistance to bacterial and fungal infections and may lead to rashes, skin discoloration and blotching. Mercury from SLPs may also enter the body via absorption through the skin, inhalation, or orally. Mercury is a neurotoxin, meaning that it damages the nervous system. Long-term use of mercury-added SLPs may damage the eyes, lungs, kidneys, digestive and immune systems.

Controlling the proliferation of mercury-added SLPs

This investigation focused on a "target list" of 74 SLPs *suspected* of containing mercury, because they had been previously tested and identified by governments, academic reports and civil society and found to contain mercury. In 2022-2023 we purchased samples of the suspected SLPs; and some brands were purchased in multiple countries. A total of 213 SLP samples were purchased by our partner NGOs from 23 online platforms in 12 countries. All samples were tested for mercury. Of the 213 SLPs purchased and analyzed, 191 (90%) were found to contain mercury levels that exceeded the

widely accepted legal threshold of 1 ppm. The mercury concentration for these samples ranged between just over 1 ppm to 74800 ppm. Based on information on the product packaging, 121 (63%) of the 191 samples were manufactured or distributed from Pakistan (34%), Thailand (17%) or China (13%). Refer to Annex M below for details.

Table A: SLPs with mercury exceeding 1 ppm

BRAND NAME	PRODUCT NAME	COUNTRY OF PURCHASE	ONLINE PLATFORM	MERCURY CONTENT RANGE (PPM)
4K Plus	Whitening Night Cream	USA	amazon.com	4700,00
African Formula	Skin Lightening Cream	USA	amazon.com	9,70
Aneeza Gold	Beauty Cream; Beauty Cream with Avocado & Aloe Vera	Antigua and Barbuda; Kenya; Nigeria	jiji.ng; ebay.com; kilimall.co.ke	13637,33 - 32255
Arché	Formula AA Pearl Cream	Bangladesh; Belgium; India; Philippines; Thailand; USA	daraz.com.bd; befr.ebay.be; amazon.in; shopee.ph; shopee.co.th; ebay.com	1,46 - 137
BeBe Special Cream		USA	ebay.com	3600,00
Carotone	Crema B.S.C	USA	amazon.com	1,90
CCM Cream		USA	ebay.com	4200,00
Chandni	Whitening Cream	India; Indonesia; Kenya; Nigeria; Thailand;	amazon.in; tokopedia.com; jumia.co.ke; jumia.com.ng; shopee.co.th	20933 - 74800
Clear N Smooth	Plus HG - Skin brightening cream	USA	amazon.com	6,60
Cleo Me'	White - Lemon Formula	Philippines; Thailand	shopee.ph; lazada.co.th	4801 - 6605
Collagen Plus Vit E	Day Cream; Night Cream	Bangladesh; Belgium; India; Indonesia; Philippines; Thailand	daraz.com.bd; befr.ebay.be; amazon.in; bukalapak.com; shopee.ph; lazada.co.th	1,18 - 6842
Crusader	Skin Lightening Cream	USA	amazon.com	16,00
Dodo	White Up - Lait Revelateur de Teint	USA	amazon.com	2,10
Dr. Japan	Nano	Kenya; Thailand	jiji.co.ke; shopee.co.th	5663 - 6249
Dr. Yankee	Night Cream	USA	amazon.com	9000 - 11000
Due	Beauty Cream	Bangladesh; India; Indonesia	Kablewala.com.bd; amazon.in; shopee.co.id	43700 - 50300
Egg White & Cherry	7 days specific eliminating freckle whitening cream	Bangladesh; India; Nigeria	Kablewala.com.bd; amazon.in; jiji.ng	6,4 - 3438
Erna	Whitening Cream	Indonesia	shopee.co.id	14,10

Face Fresh	Beauty Cream; Gold Beauty Cream	India; USA	flipkart.com; ebay.com; amazon.in	18000 - 37500
Faiza	Beauty Cream	India; Indonesia; Kenya; Philippines; Thailand, Uganda, USA	amazon.in; bukalapak.com; jumia.co.ke; shopee.ph; lazada.co.th; jiji.ug; amazon.com	7000 - 37700
Gluta White	Skin Whitening Cream - Advanced Glutathione Formula	India	flipkart.com	49300,00
Golden Pearl	Beauty Cream	Bangladesh; India; Indonesia; Kenya; Thailand	daraz.com.bd; amazon.in; tokopedia.com; jiji.co.ke; lazada.co.th	12749,79 - 43600
Goree	Beauty Cream with Lycopene; Day & Night Beauty Cream; Day & Night Whitening Cream.	India; Indonesia; Nigeria	amazon.in, shopee.co.id, shopee.ph; shopee.co.th; ebay.com; jiji.ng; bidorbuy.co.za; lazada.co.th	581 - 69900
Green Tea	seven-day - Whitening Anti- Freckle Cream	Bangladesh	daraz.com.bd	15,00
Hiyadi	Glutathione Cream - White and Bright	Philippines; Thailand; USA	shopee.ph; lazada.co.th; amazon.com	160 - 15939
Infocus	Pearl Beauty Cream	Nigeria; USA	jiji.ng; ebay.com	7524,14 - 18000
Jalea Real GRISI	Royal Jelly	USA	amazon.com	3,90
Jiaobi	BB Cream Skin Whitening Mate; Whitening & Moisturizing set: Flawless Whitening Essence, Whitening Day Cream, Whitening Make-up Base, Whitening Night Cream, Whitening Speckle- Eliminating Facial Cleanser	India, Indonesia, Thailand	flipkart.com, bukalapak.com; shopee.co.th	5,6 - 10300
Jiaoli	bird's nest - Whitening spot- removingscheme suit; HuiChuSu Face Cream 7 Days Specific Eliminating Freckle: Day, Night Cream	Bangladesh; Philippines; Thailand	daraz.com.bd; shopee.co.th; shopee.ph	5,3 - 7388
Kanza	Beauty Cream	India; Uganda; USA	amazon.in; jiji.ug; ebay.com	1,69 - 15000
Kim	Whitening Ginseng and Pearl Cream; Whitening Pearl and Snow Lotus Cream	Bangladesh; Indonesia; Philippines; Thailand	shopee.ph; lazada.co.th; daraz.com.bd; shopee.co.id; shopee.co.th	840 - 25362
Kojie San	Dream White	USA	amazon.com	7,00
Kokliang	Snow Lotus Cream	Thailand; USA	lazada.co.th; amazon.com	16,4 - 19

La Crema de Rebeca		USA	ebay.com	12000,00
Ly-Na	Nourish Face Cream	USA	ebay.com	1,40
Nano Extra White	Whitening Cream with Papaya and Carrot	USA	amazon.com	8700,00
Natural 99	Vitamin E Plus: Day Cream, Night Cream	Indonesia; Philippines	shopee.co.id; shopee.ph	2,8 - 19,3
Natural Face	Beauty (Whitening) Cream	India; Uganda; USA;	flipkart.com; jiji.ug; amazon.com; ebay.com	735 - 5400
Navia	Beauty Cream	USA	ebay.com	35000,00
New Face	Beauty Cream	Antigua and Barbuda; Côte d'Ivoire; India; Kenya; USA	ebay.com; ubuy.ci; flipkart.com; jiji.co.ke	8050 - 43700
Non-Oily Deluxe Silken	Bleaching Cream	USA	ebay.com	18000 - 20000
Noor	Gold Beauty Cream; Herbal Beauty Cream	India; Kenya; South Africa	flipkart.com; jumia.co.ke; bidorbuy.co.za	8720,23 - 44200
Noor Gold	Beauty Cream	Kenya; South Africa	jiji.co.ke; bidorbuy.co.za	15676,5 - 24248
Nunn Care	Crema Limpiadora	USA	amazon.com; ebay.com	1500 - 7100
O White Extra	Whitening Cream	Philippines; Thailand	shopee.ph, shopee.co.th	2651 - 8514
Papaya	Whitening & Freckle-Eliminating package: Day, Night cream	Bangladesh; Belgium; Côte d'Ivoire; Kenya; Nigeria; Philippines; Uganda	jiji.ug; daraz.com.bd; amazon.com.be; jumia.co.ke; jumia.com.ng; shopee.ph; ubuy.ci	2813 - 13700
Parley	Beauty Cream; Goldie Advanced Beauty Cream	Kenya; Nigeria; Philippines; Thailand; Uganda	jumia.com.ng; jiji.ug; jumia.co.ke; shopee.ph; shopee.co.th	13278,14 - 34400
POP Popular	Curcuma cream; Facial Cream	Bangladesh; Thailand; Philippines	shopee.co.th; daraz.com.bd; shopee.ph; lazada.co.th	17,6 - 2385
Promina	Ginseng Pearl Cream	USA	amazon.com	16,00
RDL	Whitening Treatment - Day and Night Cream - 8 Days Treatment: Day, Night Cream	Indonesia; Philippines	tokopedia.com; shopee.ph	1,3 - 18,5
Sakura	Gluta Speed White	Thailand	shopee.co.th	26,60
San ing	Face Cream	USA	amazon.com	7,80
San Ruby	Beauty Whitening Cream	USA	ebay.com	2,70
Sandal	Whitening Beauty Cream	Bangladesh; India	daraz.com.bd; flipkart.com	39900 - 54000
Stillman's	Skin Bleach Cream	Bangladesh; Philippines	daraz.com.bd; shopee.ph	805 - 810

Temulawak	New - Day & Night Cream - Beauty Whitening	Indonesia	bukalapak.com	27,6 - 2128
White Gold	Anti-Marks Cream Extra Brightening	Kenya; Philippines; South Africa; USA	jiji.co.ke; shopee.ph; bidorbuy.co.za; ebay.com	15,8 - 27000
White Rose	Whitening Cream: Placenta Sheep Cream, Super Gold Caviar	Philippines; Thailand	shopee.ph; lazada.co.th; shopee.co.th	747 - 3204
Yoko	Whitening Spa Salt for Armpit & Bikini Area	USA	amazon.com	1,50
Zuni Gold	Finest Beauty Cream	Kenya; Nigeria; USA	jumia.co.ke; jumia.com.ng; ebay.com	11382,08 - 19237,46

Adding to the challenge of identifying the sources of mercury SLPs, information on packaging is often misleading or false, and the possibility of counterfeit SLPs cannot be dismissed. Our investigations show that most of the mercury-added SLPs did not list mercury in the ingredients, and that many mercury-added SLPs were available on multiple online platforms around the world. For example, one SLP was purchased six times in six different countries, and all samples were found to contain mercury above the 1 ppm threshold. In other cases, the country of origin was not indicated, the name of the manufacturer was obscure, weblinks appeared to redirect to unsafe or unrelated webpages, or the indicated phone number did not connect to the manufacturer.

This report highlights the current lack of effective controls to prevent harmful and illegal mercury-added SLPs from being manufactured and offered online. Online platforms are evading their responsibility to prevent unscrupulous merchants from advertising, marketing and selling illicit mercury-added SLPs, which is occurring even in countries that are Parties to the Convention. This demonstrates the need for a more robust and coordinated international response, including additional restrictive measures, as discussed below in the African Region's proposed amendment to the Convention.

The proposed African Amendment to the Convention

Despite the Convention's ban on the manufacture and trade of mercury-added SLPs, our data, along with many other studies conducted throughout the world, demonstrate the continued proliferation and global availability of mercury-added SLPs worldwide. To address this, the African Region has proposed an amendment for the Fifth Conference of the Parties (COP5) for the Minamata Convention on Mercury, which will be held in Geneva in late October 2023. This amendment is designed to complement and strengthen the existing provisions of the Convention, and will require Parties to take additional measures to reduce the availability of mercury-added SLPs including:

- Prohibiting the manufacture and trade of "*mercury-added cosmetics*", which would replace the current language that bans cosmetics containing "*over 1 ppm mercury*."
- Curtailing the merchandising of mercury-added SLPs, including sales, offering of sales, marketing, advertising and display.
- Coordinating inter-ministerial, bilateral and/or regional measures to phase-out mercury-added SLPs.
- Enhancing public awareness about the hazards of mercury-added SLPs, especially among physicians, dermatologists and beauty centers, as well as the general public.

Conclusions and recommendations

The toxic trade in mercury-added SLPs continues relatively unimpeded due to the challenges of holding local markets and online platforms to the same enforceable standards. Furthermore, there is evidence that the proliferation of mercury-added SLPs is being driven by (1) Eurocentric beauty standards and colorism, and (2) consumer advertisements and sales offerings that lead consumers to believe these products are both desirable and safe. To address these issues, the African Region has proposed an amendment for strengthening the Convention.

Initially, Party countries where SLPs are manufactured need additional support to develop a “roadmap” for phasing out mercury added SLPs, for which the first step would be disallowing manufacture and trade. This could include a timeline and “checklist” for coordinating ministries domestically, while fostering regional and international collaboration to effectively implement and enforce the Minamata Convention ban.

Through adoption of the African Amendment, Parties will be able to enhance their regional and/or global harmonization of legislation, enforcement measures, standards and communication systems to prevent the marketing of mercury-added SLPs. Such harmonization would simplify, facilitate, and accelerate more cost-effective solutions and help reduce product-related risk to consumers. It would also simplify procedures for policing imports and exports (e.g., using hand-held testing devices), and it would eliminate the current double standards that fail to protect consumer safety. In countries and regions with limited financial and technical resources, regional cooperation is especially critical.

Despite some cases of incremental progress, online platforms are still not sufficiently motivated to verify the legality of SLPs sold. While waiting for the necessary regulatory reforms, concrete complementary steps are needed to eliminate marketing and sales of mercury-added SLPs. For example, voluntary agreements on mutual information sharing and collaboration with e-platforms are increasingly being explored by governments. During the outreach phase, channels of communication need to be established to inform e-commerce platforms about various legal requirements, including labeling, detention lists, communications when posting alerts, etc.

Since the Convention does not yet regulate all mercury compounds, COP5 should also consider examining their supply, trade and use. As reported in the 2022-23 ZMWG investigation, and confirmed by a recent feasibility study commissioned by Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) mercury compounds are an essential ingredient in mercury-added SLPs that some claim are legal to trade. It is therefore imperative that the COP considers regulating mercury compounds, subject to the Treaty’s trade restrictions.

In summary, it’s time to end the toxic trade in mercury added cosmetics. Adopting the African Region’s proposed amendment to the Minamata Convention provides a near-term opportunity to address this global public health threat. Finally, the amendment would help complement and strengthen the current treaty, close loopholes that allow advertising, display and indiscriminate sales of mercury-added SLPs, and reflect a willingness to drive the change envisioned by the Convention to “Make Mercury History”.

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