

Toxic mercury cosmetics still marketed as a 'solution' to dark skin

213 products tested from 23 online platforms across 12 countries

90% had more mercury than legal limit set by the Minamata Convention

Africa's proposed amendment would strengthen treaty by banning advertising and sales of such toxic products

Minamata Convention (COP5) negotiators urged to strengthen existing treaty

[Brussels/Belgium] Despite being banned by a global treaty, mercury-added skin lightening products (SLPs) are still sold by some of the world's biggest online retailers to unsuspecting consumers, according to a new Zero Mercury Working Group (ZMWG) report released today. The report provides yet more evidence that hazardous SLPs are widely available across the global market.

NGO partners across 12 countries, purchased 213 suspect SLPs from 23 online platforms. Out of these 191 (90%) had mercury concentrations ranging from 1.18 to 74,800.00 ppm of mercury, above the 1 ppm limit mandated for cosmetics by many governments as well as the Minamata Convention.

This report comes at a critical time as Parties to the Fifth Conference of Parties (COP5) of the Minamata Convention are preparing to discuss the amendment proposed by the Africa region which seeks to address the enforcement loopholes and implementation failures related to mercury-added cosmetics.

The African amendment is designed to strengthen the existing Convention provisions by:

- Prohibiting the manufacture and trade of all "mercury-added cosmetics", instead of only those 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 SLPs;
- Enhancing public awareness about the hazards of mercury SLPs.

This report highlights the current lack of effective controls to prevent mercury SLPs from being manufactured and sold online. Online platforms continue to evade their responsibility to prevent unscrupulous merchants from advertising, marketing and selling illicit mercury-added SLPs, which perpetuate the injustice lived by people of colour, especially women and girls, who are conditioned to adopt Eurocentric beauty standards influenced by "colourism".

Mercury lightens the skin by suppressing the production of melanin and can also remove age spots, freckles, blemishes and wrinkles. But it may lead to rashes, skin discolouration and blotching and enter the body via absorption through the skin, inhalation, or orally.

The report's findings, along with a recent Natural Resource Defence Council commissioned report, confirm that mercury compounds are an essential ingredient to SLPs. As a result, the report recommends that COP5 should lay the groundwork for regulating mercury compounds and making them subject to trade restrictions.

Michael Bender, Coordinator at Zero Mercury Working Group, said:

"Despite the Convention's ban on manufacture and trade, the proliferation and online sales of mercury cosmetics continues. However, if adopted, the African Region's amendment banning advertising and sales of illegal SLPs can help prevent online marketing."

Rico Euripidou, Campaign coordinator at groundWork in South Africa, said:

"Over the years, the African region has taken a leadership role in phasing out mercury in products, including in lighting, dentistry and now skin lightening cosmetics. Toxic cosmetics are a global mercury crisis warranting coordinated international collaboration."

Charline Cheuvert, Mercury Policy Officer at the European Environmental Bureau, said:

"Once approved, the amendment will help complement and strengthen the current treaty and close loopholes that allow advertising, display and indiscriminate sales of mercury-added SLPs. It also reflects a willingness to drive the change envisioned by the Convention to "Make Mercury History"."

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Further reading

1. ZMWG 2023 Report
2. ZMWG 2023 Report – Executive Summary, EN, FR, ES
3. ZMWG 2022 Report – “Skin Lighteners Still Online Despite Mercury Findings”
4. ZMWG 2022 Report – Executive summary.
5. ZMWG Report – “Enforcement measures to restrict high mercury cosmetic products under the Minamata Convention”

All reports above available at <https://www.zeromercury.org/mercury-added-skin-lightening-creams-campaign/>

Notes for editors

[1] 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. For

more information on health risks from mercury SLPs, see the World Health Organization fact sheet: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/330015/WHO-CED-PHE-EPE-19.13-eng.pdf>

[2] Since 2017, the ZMWG has conducted 4 separate market surveillance of suspect SLPs and we have analyzed around 1000 SLPs from over 40 online platform, which are on the ZMWG global database and the UNEP Global Mercury Partnership website, see:

<https://www.unep.org/globalmercurypartnership/resources/tool/mercury-findings-skin-lightening-products-online-database>

[3] Currently, the Convention requires that Each Party shall not allow, by taking appropriate measures, the manufacture, import or export of mercury-added Cosmetics (with mercury content above 1ppm), including skin lightening soaps and creams, see:

<https://minamataconvention.org/en/documents/minamata-convention-mercury-text-and-annexes>. Yet their use, both from local markets and the internet, continues to proliferate, due in part to the lack of national sales bans.

[4] Skin-lighteners are sold as creams, lotions and soaps. ZMWG testing indicates that hundreds if not thousands of them are available in the global market, see: www.zeromercury.org/mercury-added-skin-lightening-creams-campaign. Those that use mercury as an active ingredient often contain from 2 to 10 percent mercury by weight.

[5] Products were tested in accredited laboratories in Europe and the United States and through using a hand-held X-ray fluorescence (XRF) spectrometer or analyzer in three regional hubs:

- CASE in Côte d'Ivoire (for Africa),
- Ban Toxics in the Philippines (for Asia) and
- In Antigua and Barbuda (for Latin America and the Caribbean.)

Approximately 10% of samples tested with an XRF were sent to a laboratory for QA/QC testing.

[6] Suspect SLPs for mercury testing were purchased from the following online platforms: Amazon.com; jiji.ng; ebay.com; kilimall.co.ke; daraz.com.bd; befr.ebay.be; amazon.in; shopee.ph; shopee.co.th; ebay.com; tokopedia.com; jumia.co.ke; jumia.com.ng; daraz.com.bd; befr.ebay.be; amazon.in; bukalapak.com; lazada.co.th; shopee.co.th; Kablewala.com.bd; shopee.co.id; bukalapak.com; jumia.co.ke; shopee.ph; lazada.co.th; jiji.ug; bidorbuy.co.za; flipkart.com.

[7] Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc, Feasibility of conducting a global inventory of mercury compound supply, use and trade, (March 2023.)

[7] NGOs collecting suspect SLPs from online platforms included the following: Bio Vision Africa, Uganda; Center for Environment Justice and Development, Kenya; Centre Africain pour la Santé Environnementale, Cote d'Ivoire; groundWork, South Africa; Sustainable Research and Action for Environmental Development, Nigeria, Casa Cem, Mexico; Mercury Policy Project & WE-ACT, United States; Integrated Health Outreach (IHO), Antigua and Barbuda; Toxisphera Environmental Health Association, Brazi; BAN Toxics, the Philippines; Center for Public Health and Environment, Nepal; Earth, Thailand; Environmental and Social Development Organization, Bangladesh; NEXUS3Foundation, Indonesia; Toxics Link, India and the European Environmental Bureau, Belgium.