Online Marketing of Toxic Skin Lighteners: Mercury cosmetics marketed as ‘solution’ to dark skin

Webinar: The Dark World of Toxic Skin Lightening Products

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An international coalition of more than 110 public interest, environmental and health non-governmental organizations from over 55 countries from around the world.

Aim: Reduce/eliminate mercury supply, use, emissions, exposure, implementing the Minamata Convention.
Mercury is a bleaching agent inhibiting the formation of melanin, produces whitening, anti-freckles effect.

Mercury can be easily absorbed through the skin and lungs leading to skin rashes and damage to kidneys.

Contaminate homes, exposes residents

World Health Organization warns of the health risks of mercury SLPs—and recommends phase out

Minamata Convention bans manufacture, trade of cosmetics w/over 1 ppm mercury

Once sold primarily in local markets and beauty stores, the availability of SLPs has exploded online
Pakistan, SDPI, September 2023

- 86% of patients not aware of toxic substances, health risks of SWCs
- 63% of surveyed dermatologists are presented with facial skin problems
  - 43% of dermatologists see >10 patients per week due to SLPs
  - 40% dermatologists see >20 patients per week
- 83% agreed with advertisement ban
- Almost 100% agree on ban of Hg SWCs

Bangladesh, ESDO, 2022

- 60-70% patients’ skin problems due to toxic SLPs use
- 80% of SLP patients are women.
- 21-40 y old, average age groups using SLPs
Global samplings in 2017-2018, 2019 and 2022:

→ Focused on local markets and then online sales
→ **775 products tested**, engaging multiple NGO partners from around the globe.
→ **33% (256)** with mercury over 1 ppm

Fourth global sampling in 2022-2023:

→ Focus on online platforms
→ In total, **213 products** were purchased from over 23 e-commerce sites, and tested.
→ **90% (191)** of the products (60 different brands) had mercury above 1 ppm.
Results (2022-2023 Sampling)

HIGH-MERCURY VS. TOTAL SLPS PURCHASED ON E-COMMERCE

- # of samples purchased
- # of samples tested with mercury levels above 1 ppm

The diagram shows the comparison of high-mercury versus total SLPS purchased on e-commerce platforms, highlighting the number of samples purchased and those tested with mercury levels above 1 ppm.
✓ Ensure a zero tolerance: all “mercury-added” cosmetics to be prohibited
✓ Curtailing the (on-line) sales, advertising, marketing and merchandising of mercury SLPs
✓ Spur interagency collaboration as well as regional and global coordination
✓ Enhance awareness of the hazards of toxic SLPs
Steps to address illegal toxic SLP trade

**Legal framework, mandates and division of responsibilities**
Legal gap analysis, Licensing/registration requirements, Restrictions/bans, Labelling of ingredients and full disclosure of ingredients

**Supporting tools and measures**
Detention lists, Alert systems or Advisories (EU Safety Gate, ASEAN cosmetics Post Marketing Alert System), Capacity-building, Detection and measurement capabilities

**Inspections and sanctions**
Severe fine and penalties, screening, tools, informing consumers for better market surveillance

**Inter-agency and international Collaboration**
Mandates, national interagency/regional/international cooperation (e.g. East African Community, ASEAN, EU) collaboration with NGOs
• RAPEX established in 2001 under the General Product Safety Directive (2001/95/EC)

• Objective: Ensure that information about dangerous consumer products identified in one EU State is quickly circulated to other Member States & EU Commission

• Aim of preventing their further supply to consumers

• RAPEX utilized by EC product safety pledge to engage online platforms in unsafe product removal

• [http://ec.europa.eu/rapex](http://ec.europa.eu/rapex)
Principles for online legal reforms

• Clear liability rules to be established and enforced, with significant penalties
• E-commerce platforms must ensure that the sellers comply with domestic health and safety law (correct labelling, disclosure of ingredients etc)
• Online platforms should verify foreign third-party sellers and appoint a home-country legal representative
• Online platforms made responsible for ensuring compliance with third party seller verification, and information/ingredient disclosure requirements
• EC IT application detects RAPEX-listed products that are still sold or reappear in online markets.

https://esurveillance.ec.europa.eu/product_safety/home
Backlash against ‘fairness creams’ ads

Trend Of Obsession With Skin Colour in Pakistan
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyeOE8mgnig

Why Do Indians Love 'Fair' Skin?
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDDJabnirTM
One of the students said:

"The research was motivated by the suffering of women in my village who were using whitening creams containing toxic heavy metals like mercury. These creams were leading to deterioration of their skin over the long term. My aim is to raise awareness about the toxicity and the harm associated with these products and I recommend that the government should ban such whitening creams."
Conclusions and Recommendations

- Mercury SLPs are a global crisis warranting concerted international action
- Enforcement is key to stopping manufacturing
- All mercury compounds determined for potential use in SLPs should be banned
- Online platform liability reform is needed
- Collaboration between government agencies, domestically and internationally is key
- African Region’s proposed COP5 amendment seeks to address challenges
- Sales and advertising ban on Hg SLPs would complement existing Convention provisions
ZMWG Skin Lightening Campaign Partners

- **AFRICA** - 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**

- **AMERICAS** - Casa Cem, **Mexico**; Mercury Policy Project & WE-ACT **United States**; Integrated Health Outreach (IHO), **Antigua and Barbuda**; Toxisphera Environmental Health Association, **Brazil**

- **ASIA** - BAN Toxics, **the Philippines**; Center for Public Health and Environment, **Nepal**; Earth, **Thailand**; Environmental and Social Development Organization, **Bangladesh**; NEXUS3Foundation, **Indonesia**; Toxics Link, **India**

- **MIDDLE EAST** - Environment Friends Society, **Bahrain**

- **EUROPE** - European Environmental Bureau, **Belgium**
Thank you!

https://www.zeromercury.org/mercury-added-skin-lightening-creams-campaign/