



Environment and Social Development Organization

Webinar on Raising Awareness on Mercury-Containing Skin-Lightening Products and Their Health and Environmental Risks

Organized by: Environment and Social Development Organization -ESDO in collaboration with Youth Career & Development Organization (YCDO)

Date: 8 March 2026 | **Occasion:** International Women's Day

Overview

The webinar was organized on **International Women's Day (8 March 2026)** to connect the issue of cosmetic safety with a global platform dedicated to women's empowerment and rights. Since women are the primary users of skin-lightening products, they are more vulnerable to exposure to harmful chemicals such as mercury, hydroquinone, and steroids. The session was conducted through the Zoom online platform, enabling effective participation and engagement from community members. The timing of the session underscored that protecting women's health is essential to empowerment and informed decision-making.

The activity was conducted in Bangladesh, with participation by women and community members from Rangpur (Batgari Upazila), a rural, underprivileged area where access to reliable information on cosmetic safety is limited. **The session aimed to raise awareness about the health and environmental risks of mercury-containing harmful cosmetic products** and to promote safer alternatives among vulnerable communities.

This community was selected due to limited awareness of chemical hazards in cosmetics, high exposure to aggressive marketing of skin-lightening products, and socioeconomic barriers that restrict access to accurate health information. The community also has strong potential for knowledge-sharing at the household and local levels, making awareness interventions highly impactful.

The webinar was jointly organized by ESDO and YCDO and facilitated by ESDO experts, including **Ms. Siddika Sultana (Executive Director, ESDO)**, **Dr. Foijun Nahar (Research and Policy Associate, ESDO)**, and **Ms. Noshin Naila**, who hosted the session. The program was designed in simple, accessible language to ensure a clear understanding among participants.

The discussion focused on the health and environmental risks of mercury, hydroquinone, and steroids in skin-lightening products. Speakers explained that these chemicals can cause skin damage, kidney and neurological disorders, and reproductive health risks, while also contributing to environmental pollution through improper disposal. The session further emphasized practical guidance on reading product labels and selecting BSTI-approved and dermatologically tested cosmetics.

Question & Answer Session

The Question & Answer session was highly interactive and focused on practical concerns. Participants asked how to identify safe and harmful creams. Experts advised avoiding products containing mercury, hydroquinone, and strong steroids, and emphasized careful label reading and selection of BSTI-approved products. It was clarified that not all creams are the same, as ingredient composition varies widely, making awareness and label reading essential. Special attention was given to pregnant and breastfeeding women, who were strongly advised to avoid such harmful products due to risks to both mother and child.

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Participants were encouraged to share knowledge within their families and communities, avoid untested or imitation products, stop using harmful creams immediately if already in use, and safely dispose of them while switching to approved alternatives. The session concluded with a strong message promoting **acceptance of natural skin tone and reinforcing that true beauty is based on health and well-being rather than cosmetic appearance.**

The webinar achieved the following key outcomes

- Increased awareness of health and environmental risks of mercury, hydroquinone, and steroids in cosmetics
- Improved ability to identify BSTI-approved and mercury-free safe products
- Strengthened understanding of product label reading and ingredient awareness
- Enhanced awareness of risks for pregnant women and children
- Encouraged community-level knowledge sharing and outreach
- Empowerment of women to prioritize health over cosmetic appearance

Overall, the webinar successfully strengthened awareness among women in underprivileged communities of Rangpur. It provided practical knowledge for identifying safe cosmetic alternatives and encouraged participants to act as awareness multipliers within their communities, contributing to safer health practices and environmental protection.

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