

# STRENGTHENING ENFORCEMENT OF THE MERCURY BAN IN COSMETICS- A GLOBAL CALL TO ACTION

WITH A FOCUS ON BANGLADESH

COP-6 Online event of the Minamata Convention

*“The Hidden Threat in the Mirror: Ending Mercury in Skin-Lightening Products (SLPs) Now!”*

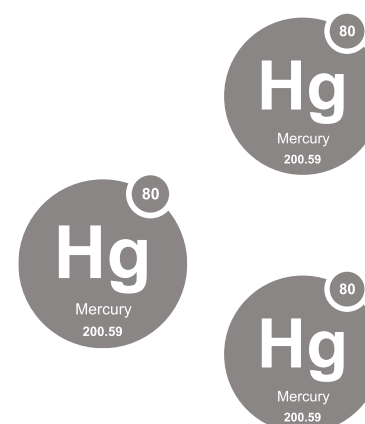
Organized By: Environment and Social Development Organization and Asian Center for Environmental Health

**Presented By: Siddika Sultana**

Executive Director, ESDO

Director, ACEH





## Context - COP-5 Decision

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- COP-5 amended the Minamata Convention to eliminate the 1 ppm threshold for mercury content in cosmetics, including skin lightening soaps and creams
- All mercury-added cosmetics, including skin-lightening products (SLPs), must be banned by 2025



# Why This Decision Matters?



## Health Risks

Mercury is a neurotoxin that can cause skin rashes, discolouration, and damage to the nervous system, kidneys, and other organs.



## Environmental Concerns

Methylmercury contaminates water and seafood, harming ecosystems and health; improper disposal of mercury products worsens contamination.



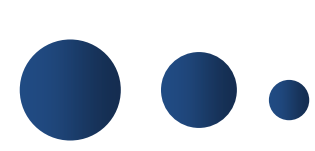
## Global Commitment

The ban reflects a collective international effort to eliminate mercury from consumer products.



**Although Mercury in Cosmetics Is Banned  
Under the Minamata Convention — What Is  
the Situation in Bangladesh?**



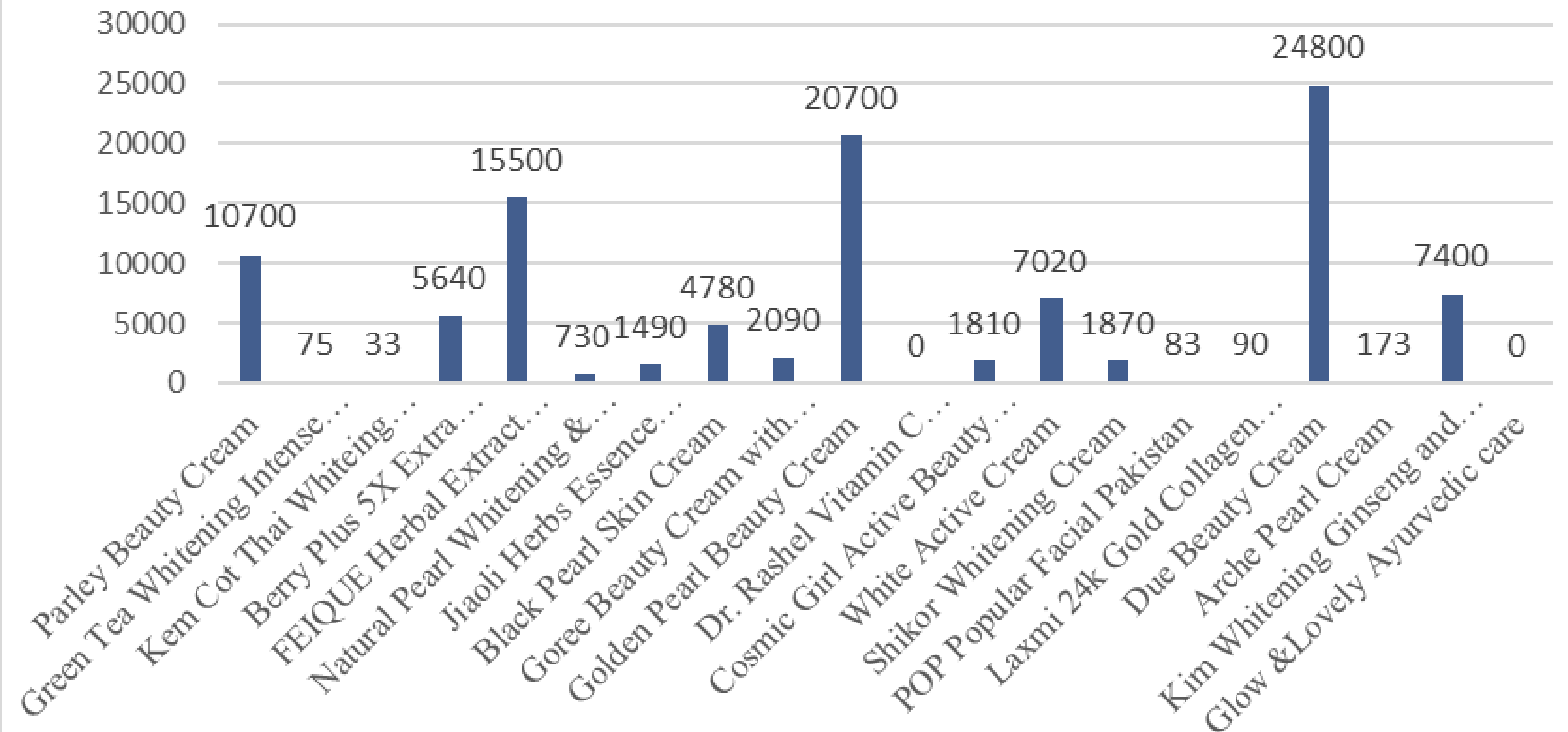


# ESDO–EEB–Ban Toxics Study (2024–2025)

## 2024–2025 Testing Results:

Testing of 26 skin-lightening creams using XRF revealed that 22 contained mercury (Hg) exceeding permissible limits.

Mercury Concentration in Tested Skin-Lightening Products (ppm) – 2025



# Survey Findings on Skin-Lightening Product Use

## ✓ Primary Users

Most users are women, with 62.2% aged 20–30.

## ✓ Usage

73% currently use skin-lightening products; **40% purchase online**, 24.6% local cosmetic shops

## ✓ Cultural Pressures

45.6% believe fair skin enhances self-esteem; 20.1% believe it improves marriage prospects.

## ✓ Knowledge Gap

72% urban; 92% of rural people are unaware mercury can be in skin-lightening products.

## ✓ Demand Drivers

Over 85% of demand is driven by online sources, with social media influencers (31.4%), celebrity endorsements (30.4%), and online ads (25.1%)

## ✓ Seller Insight

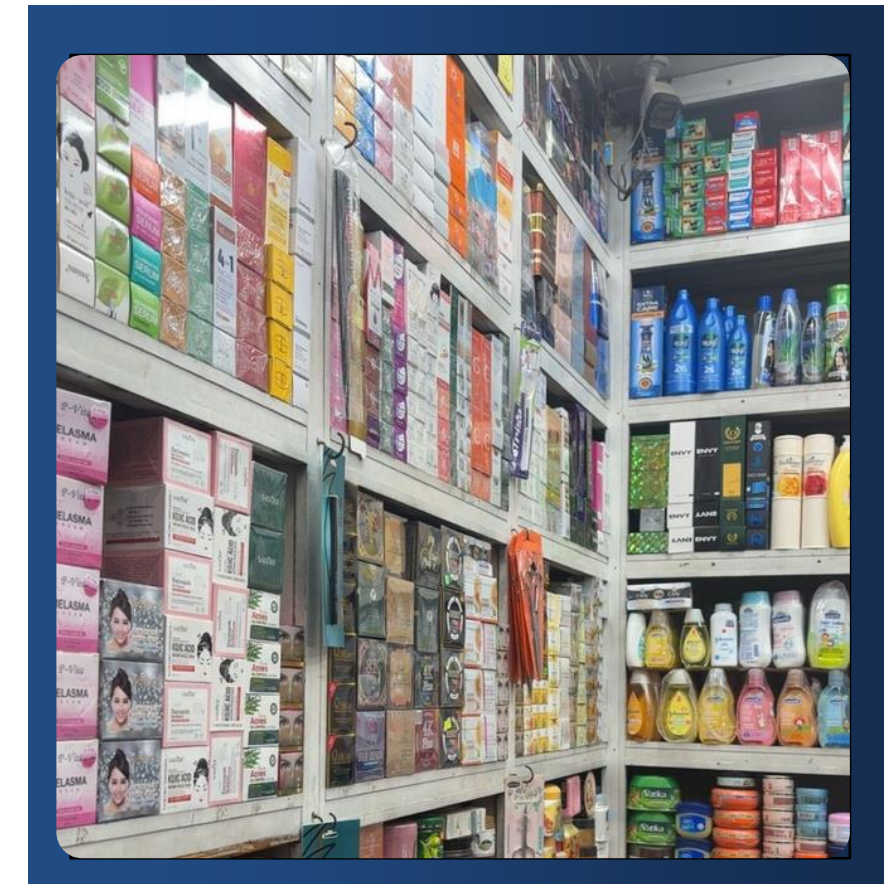
Most sell imported skin-lightening products; 92% report rising sales due to online promotions and social media, but only 37.3% know BSTI regulations.



# Findings from ESDO Market Monitoring

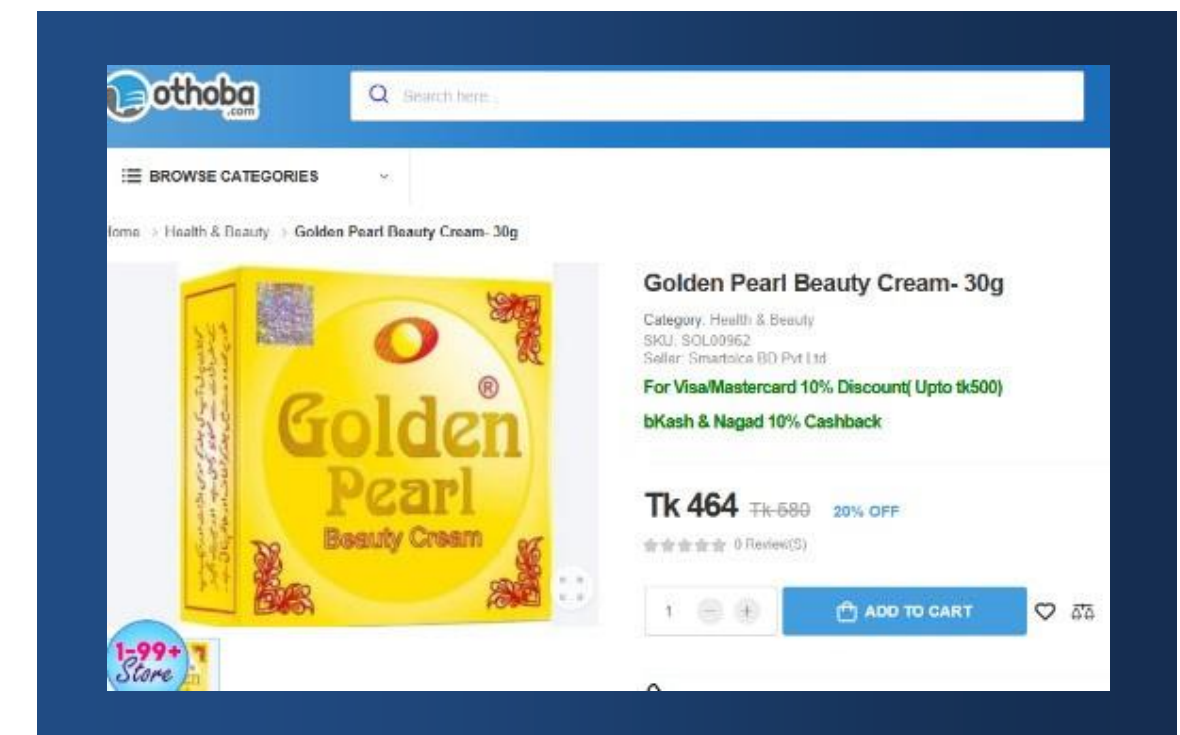
## ✓ Physical Market Monitoring

Retail shops, beauty stores, and wholesale markets continue selling banned or high-mercury products with misleading labels.



## ✓ Online Market Monitoring

Major e-commerce platforms in Bangladesh are flooded with banned creams or creams containing dangerously high mercury levels.





## Why the Bangladesh Study Is Relevant

- Concrete Evidence of Mercury-Containing Creams Available Despite Bans.
- Shows enforcement gaps — a key COP-5 decision concern.
- Links policy to practice — demonstrating why enforcement matters.
- Global relevance — indicative of challenges in other countries.
- Strengthens advocacy for enforcement guidance, capacity building, and online trade control.



# Key Challenges to Effective Enforcement

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## Incomplete Legal Framework

Many Countries have no law, and existing regulations often do not fully cover the manufacture, sale, labelling, ingredient restrictions, import, and online trade of mercury-containing cosmetics.



## Gaps in Regulatory Frameworks

Many countries lack clear guidance and controls for mercury-containing cosmetics, including advisories, prohibited product lists and robust licensing processes.



## Online Trade Loopholes

Mercury-containing products are widely sold online with little oversight of cross-border trade.



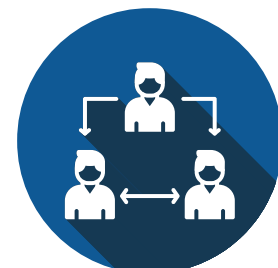
## Limited Enforcement Capacity

Limited training and resources for enforcement agencies and interagency collaboration



## Awareness Deficits

Low understanding of mercury risks among consumers and sellers.



## Coordination Barriers

Limited national and regional cooperation against the cross-border trade of mercury-containing cosmetics.

# Proposed Actions for Effective Implementation

## 1. Strengthen Legal Frameworks

- Ensure countries have clear laws banning the manufacture and trade of mercury-added cosmetics.
- Update national regulations in line with the Minamata Convention to ban mercury in cosmetics, covering mercury compounds, online sales, advertising, and all retail outlets.



## 2. Enhancing Enforcement Capacity

**To support the effective enforcement of the mercury ban, Parties should:**

- Develop enforcement guidelines
- Equip agencies with detection tools
- Conduct specialized training programs for enforcement agencies
- Establish reporting systems for better coordination



# Proposed Actions for Effective Implementation

## 3. Control Online Sales

- Establish National Regulation for Online Sales.
- Mandate compliance by online retailers with prohibited product lists, enforce seller accountability, require product safety certification, and impose penalties for violations.



## 4. Drive Change Through Awareness

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Mobilize governments, enforcement agencies, healthcare professionals, and academia.
- **Empower Consumers:** Strengthen awareness networks, focusing on vulnerable groups, especially young women.



# Proposed Actions for Effective Implementation

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## 5. From Local Action to Global Impact

- Enhance national, regional and global collaboration for joint enforcement and data sharing among neighbouring countries.
- Advance global cooperation to close regulatory gaps and restrict transboundary movement of mercury compounds





# Call to Action

## Strengthening Global Implementation

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The Secretariat should support Parties by:

- **Regulatory Guidance:** Develop guidance to help Parties align national regulations with the Minamata Convention, covering mercury compounds, online sales, advertising, and retail outlets.
- **Enforcement Guidelines:** Establish standard protocols for monitoring, testing, and enforcing mercury bans.
- **Capacity Building:** Technical and financial support to strengthen enforcement, especially in low- and middle-income countries.
- **Knowledge Sharing:** Global platform to share best practices, enforcement data, and detention lists.
- **Regional Cooperation:** Encourage regional cooperation to stop cross-border trade of mercury-laden SLPs and share best practices



# THANK YOU



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<https://esdo.org/>



<https://asiancenter.asia/>



# Addressing the Global Mercury Crisis in Skin Lightening Products Sold Online

The Hidden Threat in the Mirror: Ending Mercury in Skin-Lightening Products (SLPs) Now! 2025

COP-6 Online event of the Minamata Convention  
Organised by ESDO and ACEH, Bangladesh

Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, European Environmental Bureau

Michael Bender, Mercury Policy Project

International Co-coordinators Zero Mercury Working Group  
UNEP GMP Products Area co-leads



Picture credit, BT, ESDO 2025



# ZMWG and Hg/Skin Lightening Products Campaign Partners



- Europe's largest network > 180 NGOs > more than 40 European countries > 30 million members and supporters.
- Vision: A better future where people and nature thrive together



**Aim: Reduce/eliminate mercury supply, use, emissions, exposure, and support implementing the Minamata Convention on Mercury**



**2005**  
ZMWG  
creation

**> 55**  
Countries



**> 110**  
Member  
organisations

- **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**
- **EUROPE**- European Environmental Bureau, **Belgium**



# Overview

- EEB/ZMWG campaign evidence
- Challenges and Measures
- Voluntary measures can enhance and complement online enforcement
- Conclusion and recommendations

**Skin lightening products containing MERCURY are DANGEROUS**



Mercury is an **extremely toxic** substance, and it shouldn't be added to cosmetics. Nonetheless it is often used in **skin-lightening products** as a bleaching agent.

Mercury is easily absorbed through the skin and can cause adverse effects. The most common are:

- rashes
- allergic reactions
- skin darkening
- kidney damage
- nervous system disorders

Mercury may pass through the placenta and **affect the neural development of your baby**. When you're breastfeeding, it can pass through your milk as well and affect your child.

Using mercury added cosmetics can also contaminate your children or your partner by skin-to-skin contact.

**Ask advice and guidance to your dermatologist!**

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# Towards a Global SWP database

## Global samplings 2017- 2018, 2019, 2022, 2023

- Over 1000 products tested, engaging multiple NGO partners from around the globe
- Over 40 platforms
- Over 70 brands found with mercury above 1ppm.



Who we are | About mercury | Policy | **Projects** | Resources | News



**Mercury findings in skin-lightening products Online Database**  
Zero Mercury Working Group

[Back to Main Page](#)

Custom Search Builder

Add Condition

Column visibility Show 10 rows Print

| Year of Sampling | Brand                   | Product   | Brand in Detention List | 1 ppm Threshold Exceeded | Manufacturing Country (packaging) | Monitoring Entity | Place of Purchase | Country Of Purchase | Region Of Purchase |
|------------------|-------------------------|---|-------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 2001             | Arche Gold              | Fairness Cream                                    | N/A                     | N/A                      | Pakistan                          | EU Safety Gate    | N/A -             | Netherlands         | Europe             |
| 2002             | Jaribu                  | Le Vrai Savon Antiseptique - Jaribu Kwanza (soap) | Yes                     | Yes                      | NA                                | EU Safety Gate    | N/A -             | Germany             | Europe             |
| 2008             | Diana                   | Anti-freckle                                      | N/A                     | Yes                      | Lebanon                           | EU Safety Gate    | N/A -             | France              | Europe             |
| 2008             | Stillman's              | Skin Bleach Cream                                 | N/A                     | Yes                      | United States of America          | EU Safety Gate    | N/A -             | Germany             | Europe             |
| 2008             | Unknow (language issue) | Face cream - Yellow cream (jar 1)                 | N/A                     | Yes                      | NA                                | EU Safety Gate    | N/A -             | Germany             | Europe             |
| 2008             | Unknow (language issue) | Face cream -White cream (jar 2)                   | N/A                     | Yes                      | NA                                | EU Safety Gate    | N/A -             | Germany             | Europe             |

Showing 1 to 10 of 1,061 entries

Previous 1 2 3 4 5 ... 107 Next

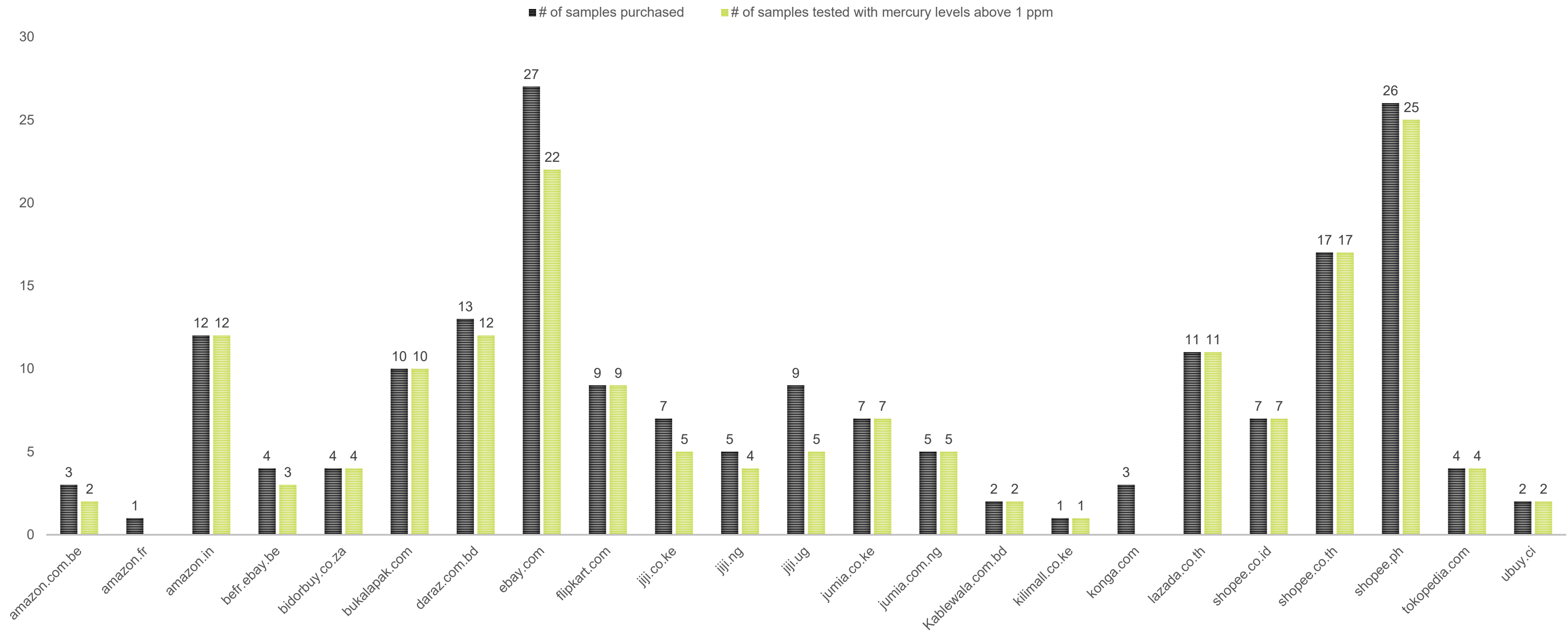


## ZMWG Database

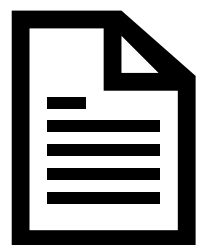
<https://www.zeromercury.org/projects/mercury-added-skin-lightening-creams-campaign-database/>



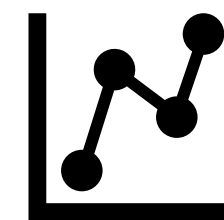
# High-Mercury vs. total SWPs purchased on e-commerce (Oct 2023)



# Gaps, Challenges & Response Measures



**Regulations** (e.g. on **manufacture**, trade, sale labelling, compounds, online services)



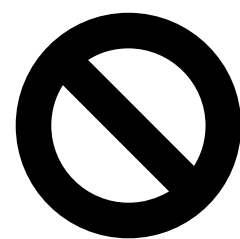
**Data collection** (e.g. sources, screening techniques XRF, etc, labs)



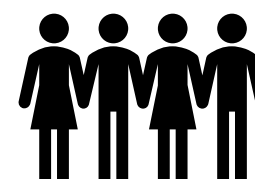
**Advisories, Prohibited products lists** (e.g. national/regional detention lists or advisories, alert systems)



**Raising Awareness** (e.g. inform regulators, health professionals, consumers, academia, CSOs)



**Licensing of manufacturers and product ingredient approvals**



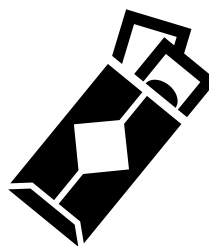
**Intergovernmental and Interregional cooperation** (e.g. defined responsibilities, coordination, police, customs, harmonization of laws, alert systems etc)



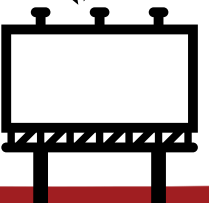
**Enforcement /Inspections** (e.g. clear mandates, responsibilities, formalized inspections, capacity building)



**Online commerce and voluntary agreements or product safety pledges (PSP)** (e.g. regulations- sales bans, voluntary agreements , product safety pledges etc.)



**Penalties and sanctions**



**Advertising / Display and Marketing**

# Principles for online legal reforms



- Clear liability rules to be established and enforced, with significant penalties
- E-commerce platforms should
  - ensure that the sellers comply with domestic health and safety law, including ingredient disclosure requirements
  - verify foreign third-party sellers and appoint a home-country legal representative
- Consumer safety regulatory approaches exist in countries around the world covering online services



Most online marketplaces have prohibitive product policies in place, and they need to enforce them!

# Key elements of product safety pledges

- **EU product safety pledge** (since 2018), voluntary actions in 20 areas, some beyond legislation.
- 11 online marketplaces
- reporting every 6m on fulfilling measures



- Local or designated contact
- Marketplaces monitor regularly government recall/detention lists
- Products removed within two days in the EU, after government/website notifications
- Trusted flagger system in place
- Information and training activities to sellers.
- Improvement in identification of similar listings
- Using of new technologies - AI image algorithms and image recognition tools, etc.
- Progress in allowing consumer groups to signal product safety concerns.

Several governments now have pledges: Australia (2020), S. Korea (2021), Japan (2023), Canada (2023), UAE(2024) and India (2024).

# Conclusions and Recommendations

- Hg/SLPs are a global crisis requiring immediate international attention
- Laws or Regulations are necessary
- Effective enforcement is critical
- Sales and offering of sales bans important, establishing liability for online platforms
- List of prohibited products should be in place
- Complemented by (potentially narrower) voluntary agreements with online platforms.
- Without globally coordinated effort, toxic SLP production and (online) trade will persist into the future

## Skin Lighteners Remain Online Despite Mercury Findings

Government reforms are needed to hold e-commerce platforms responsible for online sales of illegal high mercury skin lighteners.

The Minamata Convention bans the manufacture and trade of cosmetics with over 1 ppm mercury.

## PRE #MINAMATACOP6 ONLINE EVENTS

### Engaging Online Platforms in Enforcing Restricted Product Policies for Mercury-added Cosmetics

Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2025  
18h00 - 19h00 CEST

REGISTER | <https://bit.ly/16oct25e>

**ZER**   
mercury working group  
**20 YEARS ANNIVERSARY**

Thank you!

For more information:

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



Sri Lanka Consumer  
Affairs Authority

