



# Tracing The Supply Chain: Mercury-Added Skin Lightening Cosmetics in Gabon, Jamaica and Sri Lanka

The global skin-lightening industry exceeded **US\$10 billion** in 2025 and is projected to reach **US\$18 billion by 2034<sup>1</sup>**. Products are widely used across **Africa, Asia,** and the **Caribbean**, many containing harmful chemicals such as steroids, hydroquinone and mercury. Skin lightening products (SLPs) remain easily accessible, especially online, due to weak enforcement, informal supply chains, and persistent cultural norms.

## PREVALENCE

The 3 regional percentages refer to women

### Africa<sup>2,3</sup>

52%

**Gabon<sup>6</sup>**  
>80% of women,  
many under 18

### Asia<sup>4</sup>

50%

**Sri Lanka<sup>7</sup>**  
peak use  
ages 20–25

### Caribbean<sup>5</sup>

20 to  
30%

**Jamaica<sup>8,9</sup>**  
use starts ~11  
years. Majority  
of users are  
men

## CULTURAL DRIVERS



Colorism,  
colonial legacies,  
and media ideals



Strong social  
and peer pressure  
for lighter skin



Low awareness  
of health risks



Influencers and  
community leaders key  
for behavior change

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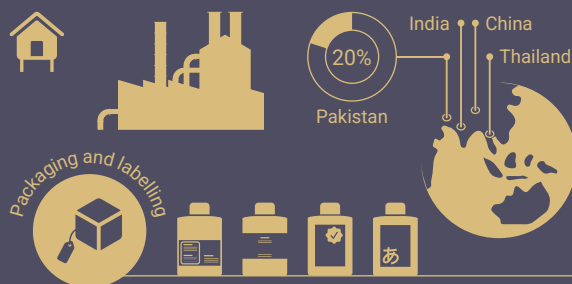
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# Key Findings Along The Supply Chain

Active ingredients: mercury compounds, hydroquinone, corticosteroids; inorganic mercury salts widely used. Raw materials often sourced through informal, poorly regulated supply chains, limiting traceability.<sup>10,11</sup>

## Raw material sourcing



## Production

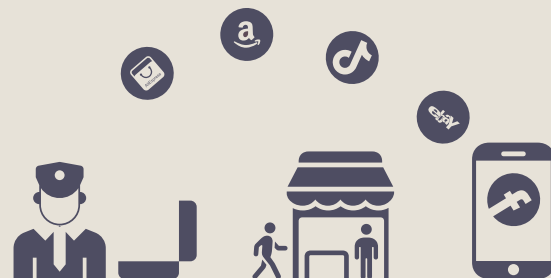


Major production hubs, based on the packaging, are in Asia. Pakistan accounts for ~20% of mercury-added SLPs. Production occurs in both formal factories and informal settings. Many SLPs on the market do not meet national or international labelling standards.<sup>12,13</sup>

## Distribution and trade



Customs and border controls often lack know-how and equipment to detect illegal SLPs. Oversight of distribution is limited. Social media and e-commerce platforms enable widespread cross-border sales that bypass regulation.<sup>3,11,14</sup>



## Sales and marketing



High demand driven by cultural norms, low prices, and aggressive marketing. Social media, e-commerce, and influencers heavily promote SLPs. Marketing reinforces colorism and beauty ideals favoring lighter skin. Weak oversight of online ads.<sup>15,16</sup>

## Disposal



Disposal of SLPs and packaging is largely unmanaged. Waste systems are not equipped to handle cosmetics with hazardous chemicals. Environmental risks are rarely addressed in SLP policies or regulations.<sup>17</sup>



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# Recommendations



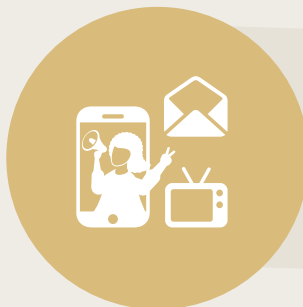
**Strengthen regulations and enforcement** by aligning national laws with the Minamata Convention, banning the manufacture, import and export of mercury-added cosmetics and effectively enforcing it, establishing public-facing national cosmetic registries, publishing prohibited products' lists, enforcing mandatory product listing, and applying sanctions such as fines, license revocation, and the blocking of non-compliant websites.



**Enhance supply-chain controls** by controlling and where possible eliminating the trade of mercury and mercury compounds, especially for non-allowed uses; establishing full product traceability; tightening import and distribution licensing and testing; and restricting the use of harmful ingredients, especially among vulnerable populations.



**Improve market surveillance** through regular market surveys, strengthened oversight of online marketing and e-commerce platforms, promote complementary approaches and enforcement against misleading advertising.



**Increase public awareness and promote behavioral change** by using consumer-behavior insights, national awareness campaigns, influencer and community engagement, clear product labelling, and the promotion of inclusive and positive beauty norms, working also with women and youth.



**Build stakeholder capacity** by training regulators, customs officials, market surveillance authorities and healthcare professionals; strengthening laboratory capabilities; and supporting compliance among small retailers.



**Ensure safe disposal** by integrating cosmetic waste into hazardous-waste management systems; providing public guidance on safe identification and disposal of dangerous products; and ensuring that seized mercury-added cosmetics are properly stored, treated and disposed.



**Strengthen international cooperation** by sharing data, intelligence, and banned-product lists across regions, networks, and enforcement bodies.

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