

# The impacts of neo-liberalism on public health: A case study of skin bleaching among women living in Zimbabwe

Princess Nyoni Kachambwa\*, Wanapa Naravage, Nigel F. James, Marc van der Putten

Faculty of Public Health, Thammasat University Rangsit Campus, Khlong 1, Khlong Luang, Pathumthani, Thailand

## ABSTRACT

**Main Objective:** To find out the impacts of free markets on public health using skin bleaching among the women living in Zimbabwe as a case study.

**Materials and methods:** The study was designed as a case study which used a combined methodology facilitated by a cross sectional online survey among 270 women living in Zimbabwe and key informant interviews among 10 cosmetic sellers in Zimbabwe.

**Results:** All the key informants reported to be selling skin lightening cosmetics amongst their cosmetics, some of these cosmetics reported being illegal. All skin lightening products were reported to be hoarded outside Zimbabwe. Corruption and relaxed policies on cosmetic regulation were suggested to be enabling entry of some of the illegal and potentially harmful products in the country. The prevalence of skin bleaching among the participants was 31.15% and most of the participants (61.40%) were ignorant about skin bleaching cosmetics' side effects.

**Conclusion:** Results from the study imply neo-liberalism could be promoting a high influx of harmful skin bleaching cosmetics in the Zimbabwean market putting a considerably high number of women who bleach their skin at risk and therefore having a negative impact on public health. Targeted health education i.e. on skin bleaching,

regulatory public health policies and their enforcement can play an important role in controlling access and subsequently curbing the detrimental effects of skin bleaching products and improve the health of the public.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite its distinct benefits on various economies, neo-liberalism could also have some negative impacts on the health of the public<sup>1</sup>. The effects could be further reinforced by globalization in which policies from one nation can affect other nations due to the inter-relatedness. Neo-liberalism is an economic policy which is focused on shifting economic factors from the government to the private sector<sup>2</sup>. The policy promotes free market capitalism and also calls for reduction of government regulation on markets<sup>3</sup>. Markets will typically do anything to remain competent and profitable; of which giving them freedom could make them go out of boundaries to maximize profits for instance false advertising, using cheap and potentially harmful materials to produce goods. The later can be exemplified by some potentially harmful products on people's health which flood today's market such as harmful skin bleaching cosmetics<sup>4</sup> and counterfeit drugs<sup>5</sup>.

This study will focus on skin bleaching as a case study. Skin bleaching is practiced globally, mainly by women and is epidemic in Asian and African

## Corresponding author:

Princess Nyoni Kachambwa,  
Email: princessnyoni942@gmail.com,

**Key words:** Neo-liberalism, skin bleaching, skin bleaching cosmetics, cosmetic sellers, women, Zimbabwe

countries<sup>6,7</sup>. Most of the skin lightening cosmetics are made with hazardous chemicals<sup>8,9</sup> which are usually cheaper. Several governments have tried to ban some of the products but the products seem to continuously prevail in the market.

Skin bleaching cosmetics were reported to be rampant in Zimbabwe and some have reported them as illegal<sup>11,12,13</sup>. There was only one organization (Medicines Control Authority Zimbabwe) identified to be responsible for regulating medicines and cosmetics. Nonetheless, the organization reported to be mainly regulating medicines and very few cosmetics<sup>14</sup> which shows minimal government intervention in the cosmetic market. Liberating this market seems to be leading to a high influx of potentially harmful skin bleaching products in the country. Therefore, the researcher's main objective was to explore further the possible impacts of this "free market" especially to the consumers by exploring skin bleaching patterns among the women living in Zimbabwe and exploring the cosmetic market through the cosmetic sellers in Zimbabwe.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study was a descriptive case study design using a combined methodology facilitated by an online survey among 270 women living in Zimbabwe and key informant interviews among 10 cosmetic sellers in Zimbabwe.

### **Data collection procedure**

#### *Survey*

The study included women staying in Zimbabwean who had internet access, who participated on social media i.e. twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Google+, who did not participate in pretesting of the questionnaires and who were willing to give consent. Online self-administered questionnaires were distributed to the participants using the online survey software; Survey Monkey.

#### *Key informant interviews*

Male and female sales persons, including foreigners who sell cosmetics in Zimbabwe, whose contact details could be found on the internet and who were willing to give consent were included in the study. Cosmetic sellers were identified on the internet and on internet based social media pages where cosmetics are sold in Zimbabwe. The researcher contacted them via telephone and after the marketer consented, he/she was interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were transcribed and calls were recorded for reference.

### **Ethical consideration**

The study was approved by Thammasat University, Ethical board (approval code-3: ECScTU).

### **Data collection process and analysis**

Data were collected over a period of 12 weeks for both survey and interviews including pretesting of the questionnaires. Cosmetic sellers were contacted and those who were able to give consent participated in the interviews. All interviews were conducted via telephone on an average time of 4.7 minutes. Information from Semi-structured interviews was transcribed, key quotes and themes were highlighted. The online questionnaire was sent to 270 women and the data was transferred from the software to SPSS version 13 for quantitative descriptive analysis.

## **RESULTS**

### **Survey**

Due to errors, 260 questionnaires were analyzed out of a total of 270 giving a response rate of 96.3%.

#### *Demographic data*

The mean age of the women was 31.69 (SD=8.12). The median age was 31 (min = 18years, max =63years). Age was grouped into 2 categories; young adults which were categorized between 18-39years and middle aged to older adults which were categorized 40 years and above. Table 1 summarizes the rest of the demographic results.

**Table 1: Demographic data (n=260)**

Variable	Frequency	% Frequency
Age		
Young	217	83.46
Middle aged-older	43	16.54
Marital Status		
Single	99	38.08
Married	129	49.62
Others (divorced and widowed)	32	12.31
Highest education attained		
Tertiary	237	91.15
Others (primary and secondary)	23	8.85
Occupation		
Students	48	18.46
Executive	141	54.23
Others (house wife, informal)	71	27.31
Location		
Urban	191	73.46
Rural	69	25.54

*Use and patterns of skin lightening cosmetics*

A total of 81 participants reported to be using skin bleaching cosmetics which gave a prevalence of 31.15%. Majority of the participants (61.40%) were not aware of the side effects of skin bleaching.

**Key informant interviews**

Eighteen sellers were contacted and only 10 of them gave consent. Of the 10 sellers (4 males and 6 females) interviewed; 7 were shop representatives, 2 were pharmacy store owners and 1 street market representative. Below are the key themes from the key informant's responses supported by some quotes.

Key informants were asked whether they sell skin lightening products among their cosmetics

All the interviewees admitted to be selling skin lightening products along other cosmetics.

Sources of products and related responses;

The key informants reported to be importing skin lightening products and pay their taxes to Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA).

Legality of skin lightening products and related responses;

There were mixed ideas on the legality of the products; interviewees suggested some of the skin lightening products to have been illegal whilst others seemed legal as supported by interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9 respectively.

- *“Because we sell some of our products with hydroquinone whilst hiding them.”* (interviewee 1, male)
- *“They don't want hydroquinone in cosmetics.”* (interviewee 2, male)
- *“As long the products are labeled free from hydroquinone, they don't fuss over them.”* (interviewee 3, female)
- *“Any lightening creams without hydroquinone or mercury can be sold.”* (interviewee 4, male)
- *“We are a licensed pharmacy, all our products pass through the right channels. However, we do have steroidal creams for different skin problems not sure if customers abuse those.”* (interviewee 5, female)
- *“My products are safe, they don't have any hydroquinone so I don't really have problems in selling them.”* (interviewee 6, female)
- *“I don't put any cream or soap labeled hydroquinone on display so no one bothers my shop.”* (interviewee 7, female)
- *“I have a lot of skin lightening creams and soaps but if they are found to contain hydroquinone or mercury, I get arrested.”* (interviewee 9, female)

Demand of the skin lightening products and related responses;

All the respondents reported that the skin lightening cosmetics were on demand compared to the others. They further reported the demand being attributed to being beautiful, having smooth and healthy skin, being socially marketable and having even skin tone.

Quality and safety assurance of cosmetics and related responses;

All the shop owners reported that the police used products labels to check for quality and safety. None of them reported to have encountered a scenario whereby products would be sent to the lab for testing. The pharmacy store owners reported not to be selling any products with hydroquinone or mercury.

The importation process of the products and related responses;

Interviewees 1,2,3,4 and 7 and their responses suggested corruption as their main getaway for selling some of the illegal products. This can be supported by some of their quotes below;

- *“We just pay extra to get in our all our goods.”*(interviewee 1, male)
- *“I only sell on behalf of my Nigerian boss but I think he knows someone from the officials.”*(interviewee 2, male)
- *“I even have some big politicians coming for my cream.”* (interviewee 3, female)
- *“You have to do whatever you can to survive.”*(interviewee 4, male)
- *“I hoard my products and smuggle via Chirundu border.”*(interviewee 7, female)

## DISCUSSION

The cosmetic market in Zimbabwe appears to be a free market basing with the interview findings which identified the cosmetic sellers to be able to sell various skin bleaching cosmetics under minimum regulation. Corruption i.e. weak law enforcement coupled by the fact that the only one organization which is supposed to be regulating the cosmetics does not fully do so seem to be increasing the freedom in the market. The later subsequently allows entry of any skin bleaching cosmetics in the country regardless of their probable hazard. Anecdotic evidence shows that a lot of unregulated medicines are sold in the streets of Harare which is high likely or even worse for cosmetics since MCAZ claims to give more attention to the medicines than cosmetics in terms of regulation.

Skin bleaching prevalence was 31.15% which implies skin bleaching could be common in Zimbabwe confirming Chenjerai, Dhube and Gwaravanda's findings. Skin bleaching cosmetics were also discovered to be common and on demand from the interviews, which further confirms the considerably high rate of skin bleaching among women living in Zimbabwe. Most of the participants, over 60%, were ill-informed about the side effects of the skin bleaching products. Other studies also found lack of awareness on side effects in participants. The lack of awareness could be due to the incomplete information provided by the cosmetic manufacturers. Certain skin lightening cosmetic manufacturers were reported to be misbranding potentially toxic products so that they uphold customers' trust. Zimbabwe is even at a higher risk of receiving these misbranded cosmetics since the interviewees reported illegal elements like mercury to be detected mainly or rather only through labels. The ignorance on side effects could also be due to lack of health education on cosmetics particularly those that lighten skin.

Most of the reasons which inspire participants to bleach their skin as reported by the key informants seem to be endorsed by the media under the influence of the cosmetic industry. Most adverts use light skinned models to represent various good things such as beauty, success and being healthy'. The industry however seems to be hiding the darker side of some of these skin bleaching cosmetics. Apart from beauty, some of these skin lightening cosmetics markets even promote health in their products. Other cosmetics companies put labels which claim their products to be “free from” substances usually known to be harmful, which can distract the consumers from scrutinizing the rest of the ingredients and can be misleading to consumers. The “free from” claims could also be false. Some authors likewise confirmed false advertising by markets to surpass their competitors as a result of neo-liberalism.



### Strength and weaknesses of the study

The weakness of the study was the convenience sampling which might have been biased towards urban women, under-representing women from the rural areas therefore not being a representative of the whole population. Therefore, only tentative conclusions could be drawn from the study. However, the information from the study provides preliminary evidence which can aid in future major studies. The other limitation was that participants for interviews were scarce and even the few we interviewed, might have withheld some information due to fear of persecution. However, the study employed a mixed methodology as a strength which could have enabled gathering of a lot more comprehensive information on the subject.

### CONCLUSION

Evidence from the study shows neo liberalism possibly contributes to the presence of harmful unregulated skin bleaching cosmetics in the market, which are incorrectly advertised as safe and hence promoting dangerous skin bleaching practices. As an immediate and short term intervention, public health experts are encouraged to do targeted health education to increase awareness on skin lightening cosmetics. Long term interventions should be aimed at policy changes which could alleviate the negative impacts of neo liberalism policy. At national level, as public health experts, we recommend government to put in place a board responsible for effective regulating of all incoming cosmetics not excluding laboratory testing of products to detect any harmful elements. Additionally, adverts on cosmetics should undergo scrutiny before they are published. Advocacy of cosmetic related policies which preserves health of the population is also encouraged globally.

### REFERENCES

1. Garnham LM. Public health implications of 4 decades of neoliberal policy: A qualitative case study from post-industrial west central Scotland. *J Public Health (Oxf)*. 2017 Dec 1;39(4):668–77.

2. Maskovsky J, Kingfisher C. Introduction to special issue on global capitalism, neoliberal policy and poverty. *Urban Anthropology and studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*; 2001. 101–121 p. (2-3; vol. 30).
3. Kotz DM. Globalization and Neoliberalism. *Rethinking Marxism*. 2002 Jun 1;14(2):64–79.
4. World Health Organization. Preventing disease through healthy environments mercury in skin lightening products. World Health Organization; 2011.
5. Khan AY, Ghilzai NMK. Counterfeit and substandard quality of drugs: The need for an effective and stringent regulatory control in India and other developing countries. *Indian Journal of Pharmacology*. 2007 Jul 1;39(4):206.
6. Peltzer K, Pengpid S, James C. The globalization of whitening: prevalence of skin lighteners (or bleachers) use and its social correlates among university students in 26 countries. *International Journal of Dermatology*. 2016;55(2):165–72.
7. Giudice PD, Yves P. The widespread use of skin lightening creams in Senegal: a persistent public health problem in West Africa. *International Journal of Dermatology*. 2002;41(2):69–72.
8. Souza MM de. The concept of skin bleaching in Africa and its devastating health implications. *Clinics in Dermatology*. 2008 Jan 1;26(1):27–9.
9. Peregrino CP, Moreno MV, Miranda SV, Rubio AD, Leal LO. Mercury Levels in Locally Manufactured Mexican Skin-Lightening Creams. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2011 Jun;8(6):2516–23.
10. Davids LM, van Wyk J, Khumalo NP, Jablonski NG. The phenomenon of skin lightening: Is it right to be light? *South African Journal of Science*. 2016 Dec;112(11–12):1–5.
11. Chenjerai E. Illegal Skin Bleaching Creams Flood the Market In Zimbabwe. *Global Press*

- Journal [Internet]. 2016 Nov 21; Available from: <https://globalpressjournal.com/africa/zimbabwe/illegal-skin-bleaching-creams-flood-market-zimbabwe/>
12. Dhube AE. Usage of skin lightening products and health problems encountered by college students at Kushinga Phikelela Polytechnic, Zimbabwe [Internet] [Thesis]. Solusi University; 2017 [cited 2019 May 17]. Available from: <http://scholar.solusi.ac.zw/handle/123456789/84>
  13. Gwaravanda ET. Shona Proverbial Implications on Skin Bleaching: Some Philosophical Insights. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*. 2011 Jun;4(4).
  14. Medicines Control Authority of Zimbabwe. Guideline on submission of documentation for registration of complementary medicines. Medicines Control Authority of Zimbabwe; 2016.
  15. African News Agency. Unregulated, unregistered medicines reportedly flooding into Zimbabwe. IOL [Internet]. 2019 Jan 11 [cited 2019 Jul 19]; Available from: <https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/unregulated-unregistered-medicines-reportedly-flooding-into-zimbabwe-18694783>.
  16. January J, Mberi YT, Muchenje RR, Gonah L, Shamu S, Tapera R. Use of skin lightening creams among female University students in Zimbabwe: a preliminary survey. *Medical Journal of Zambia*. 2018;45(1):44–8.
  17. Chisvert A, Sisternes J, Balaguer Á, Salvador A. A gas chromatography–mass spectrometric method to determine skin-whitening agents in cosmetic products. *Talanta*. 2010 Apr 15;81(1):530–6.
  18. Mendoza RL. The skin whitening industry in the Philippines. *J Public Health Pol*. 2014 May 1;35(2):219–38.
  19. Naidoo L, Khoza N, Dlova NC. A Fairer Face, a Fairer Tomorrow? A Review of Skin Lighteners. *Cosmetics*. 2016 Sep;3(3):33.
  20. Hunter ML. Buying Racial Capital: Skin-Bleaching and Cosmetic Surgery in a Globalized World. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*. 2011 Jun;4(4).
  21. Jacobs M, Levine S, Abney K, Davids L. Fifty Shades of African Lightness: A Biopsychosocial Review of the Global Phenomenon of Skin Lightening Practices. *J Public Health Africa* [Internet]. 2016 Dec 31 [cited 2019 Feb 11];7(2). Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5345401/>
  22. Nobile V. Misleading Marketing of Cosmetics. Do the “Free from Parabens” and “Free from Allergenic Substances” Claims Really Make Sense? *Journal of Cosmetology & Trichology*. 2016 Feb 25;2(1):1–2.
  23. Azcuenaga ML. The role of advertising and advertising regulation in the free market. In: *The Turkish Association of Advertising Agencies, Conference on Advertising for Economy and Democracy*. Turkey: Federal Trade Commission; 1997.