



2022 Safer Personal Care Products Workshops

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¹ <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/documents/2204038.pdf>

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⁴ www.ecology.wa.gov/accessibility

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Background

Our missions

The mission of Mother Africa is to support African refugee and immigrant women and their families to reach their highest potential. Mother Africa is committed to leadership building, advocacy, and community action to reduce barriers to healthcare, education, safety, and economic independence—all while fostering a comfortable space to celebrate our cultures, our families, and our growth.

The mission of Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) is to protect, preserve, and enhance Washington's environment for current and future generations. The mission of the Hazardous Waste and Toxics Reduction (HWTR) Program is to protect Washington's residents and environment by reducing the use of toxic chemicals, safely managing dangerous waste, preventing new contaminated sites, and cleaning up contamination. The HWTR vision is to be national leaders in minimizing and eliminating the impacts of toxic chemicals and hazardous waste.

Personal care products

Personal care products can contain potentially toxic chemicals that pollute the environment and disproportionately impact certain groups, raising health equity and environmental justice concerns (Ecology, 2020; Zota and Shamasunder 2017). Some of these products contain chemicals such as phthalates, which are often added to bind a fragrance or color to products. However, phthalates may also have unintended health effects, such as interfering with hormone systems. While personal care product use is widespread in the U.S., women may have elevated exposure to harmful chemicals, as they are the primary consumers of many personal care products (CDC, 2012).

Safer options are becoming more accessible to families. Still, stronger policies are needed on the federal level to ensure all personal care products are safe. Until then, interested individuals can learn tips to help them identify safer personal care products.

Mother Africa community engagement

As part of the Mother Africa mission, they continually raise environmental awareness and advocate for equal access to health care for their communities. Therefore, Mother Africa has intensified efforts to communicate and collaborate with many organizations and agencies that serve the environment and society.

Mother Africa has been running a Safer Healthy Homes program for three years. Program participants, who are part of immigrant and refugee communities from African and the Middle East, expressed interest in educational workshops about safer self-care products.

Mother Africa is constantly striving to expand awareness to more communities, helping their new clients adopt a healthier lifestyle and choose safer self-care products. To connect with their communities, Mother Africa speaks and teaches in the languages of the communities they serve.

Ecology and Mother Africa partnership

In 2022, Ecology and Mother Africa met to discuss a project that could equip communities in Washington with information and resources to protect themselves and their families from harmful chemicals in their self-care products. Mother Africa and Ecology partnered to host a series of workshops as a pilot project. The workshops used a community-centered and culturally relevant approach to engage African and Middle Eastern immigrant and refugee communities who may face disproportionate exposure to harmful chemicals in personal care products.

Our joint objectives for this partnership were to:

- Co-design a pilot project with input from community members.
- Consult community leaders to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach materials, approaches, and resources, in support of the project aim.
- Share technical knowledge related to safer personal care with Mother Africa staff.
- Provide safer personal care products to communities and share information on identifying ingredients in these products.
- Increase Ecology's capacity to support culturally appropriate outreach and equitable toxics reduction work by collaborating with and learning from community-based organizations who work with diverse communities facing disproportionate exposures to toxics in consumer products.
- Identify pilot successes, collective learning experiences, community interest, and available resources.
- Consider the potential for replicating the pilot project and extending to other language groups.

Process

Mother Africa works with community members, sometimes via surveys, to identify what topics are most important to them and will help them best protect their families. During initial planning, Ecology and Mother Africa decided to focus on safer cosmetics for the pilot project.

The Mother Africa team worked closely with Ecology communication specialists and scientists to determine key messages and develop a workshop curriculum. The goal of these workshops was to empower individuals to take action without scaring or overwhelming them with material.



Figure 1: Safer self-care kit.

Participants who attended a workshop were given a gift card. Mother Africa used a log to inventory and track the gift cards. As an additional incentive and an educational tool, Mother Africa provided workshop participants with safer self-care kits containing personal care products. Each self-care kit contained the same products, which Ecology staff suggested as examples of safer options.

Offering the safer self-care kits ensured that participants could interact with positive examples during the workshop. Many clients do not speak English as their first language, so it was especially helpful for them to have safer product examples.

Workshop participants

Workshop participants originated from many countries, including Burkina Faso, West Africa, Mali, United States, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Togo, Rwanda, Sudan, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Tunisia, Iraq, Eritria, Kenya, Morocco, Egypt, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and Ethiopia. Staff translated the workshops into Arabic, French, and Amharic.

Safer self-care products workshops

Key workshop objectives:

- Define “self-care products” (soap, lotion, hair care products, and makeup).
- Discuss harmful chemicals found in some cosmetics and beauty products.
- Learn how to recognize when products contain certain harmful chemicals.
- Learn about health impacts from exposure to toxic chemicals.
 - How do toxic chemicals get in our bodies?
 - What harm can toxic chemicals do?
- Learn tips to reduce the impact of harmful chemicals found in self-care products.
- Offer an opportunity to talk to a specialist and ask questions about self-care products and safer ingredients.

Mother Africa and Ecology created the staff training and workshop slides together. The teams then conducted the staff training with Mother Africa community leaders and staff who lead programs to spread awareness to their clients and families.

The workshops were held virtually because of pandemic restrictions. Mother Africa’s Safer Self-care Products program recruited 20 staff members and 15 French speakers, 15 Arabic speakers, and 15 Amharic speakers from the communities Mother Africa serves, for a total of 65

participants. The Mother Africa team scheduled, hosted, developed agendas, facilitated, and provided feedback for the staff training and three community workshops.

They also purchased, assembled, and delivered kits containing safer personal care products to workshop attendees. For each of the three community workshops, Mother Africa coordinated interpreters.

During the training, Mother Africa staff acquired technical knowledge about safer personal care products that they could share with their communities. Staff translators appreciated that Mother Africa and Ecology reviewed workshop materials during the staff training to prepare for the community workshops. Running the Mother Africa staff training before the community workshops helped the Ecology team practice answering questions and working with staff translators.

Before the community workshops, the Safer Self-Care Coordinator delivered a safer self-care kit to each participant. Participants were asked to fill out a pre-workshop survey about their self-care product purchasing practices.



Figure 2: Delivering a safer personal care kit.



Figure 3: Mother Africa team during staff training.

During the workshops, participants completed a small group activity where they learned how to read labels, including symbols and expiration dates, and how to look for harmful ingredients. In particular, participants learned how to find self-care products that do not contain:

- Fragrance
- Parabens
- Phthalates

Participants also had the opportunity to make a low-cost self-care product with a recipe they could keep and use in the future.

Following the staff training and community workshops, Mother Africa staff worked with a community member who missed the workshops. This client had concerns about shampoo that might have been damaging her daughter’s scalp, so Mother Africa helped identify an alternative product.

Self-care kits

The Mother Africa team worked with Ecology subject matter experts to select the products included in the safer self-care kits. Mother Africa identified the types of personal care and beauty products they felt clients would be most interested in using. They also found a simple recipe for a facial scrub and included ingredients for the scrub in the self-care kits.

Based on feedback from Mother Africa, Ecology staff created a list of potential options for each type of product that would be included in the kit. Mother Africa staff and Ecology identified products that were available for purchase at a price that fit within the project budget.



Figure 4: Mother Africa team preparing safer self-care products kits.

The safer self-care product kits contained the following products:

- Woodstock Farms Organic Brown Sugar
- Dr. Bronner’s — Pure-Castile Bar Soap
- Coco Road Organic & Fair Trade Virgin Coconut Oil
- Everyone 3-in-1 Lotion for Hands/Face/Body with Natural Herbal Extracts and Essential Oils, Unscented
- Beauty by Earth Organic Lip Balm
- ACURE Ultra Hydrating Shampoo & Conditioner Duo
- Burlap bag

Questions from workshop participants

Below are some of the questions we received from participants during the workshops.

- Is X substance in my cosmetics safe? Substances mentioned include:
 - “Natural” quinones
 - Alcohol and glycerin
 - Collagen
 - Gluten
 - Mineral oil and Vaseline
- Are there other chemicals we should look for?
- It’s hard to read ingredient lists. Is there a symbol I can look for?
- If I have been using personal fragrances daily, what should I do now?
- How do we know that mineral oil and Vaseline are pure enough?
- What lotion should I use for my sensitive skin?
- How long can I expect my cosmetics to last if I don’t see an expiration date?

Survey Questions and Results

The Mother Africa and Ecology teams designed the survey questions to collect information about participants' behaviors, needs, and opinions and to measure clients' understanding of safer personal care products before and after the workshops. This information will inform future workshops and advocacy work within the African and Middle Eastern refugee and migrant communities that Mother Africa serves.

For the educational workshops, Mother Africa conducted pre- and post-workshop surveys with all 45 participants. They asked similar questions in both surveys to assess changes in participants' awareness and behavior change.

The tables below show the survey questions, including the percentage of participants who responded to each option in the pre- and post-workshop surveys.

What do you look for when you buy self-care products, like lotion, cosmetics, or hair products?

Table 1: Question 1. What do you look for when you buy self-care products, like lotion, cosmetics, or hair products?

Response	Pre-Workshop	Post-Workshop
Price	19.7%	12.8%
Smell	12.7%	8.5%
Color/style/package	5.6%	4.3%
Brand	38%	8.5%
Ingredients	23.9%	66%
Something else	0%	0%

Do you read or look at labels or ingredient lists when you are buying self-care products?

Table 2: Question 2. Do you read or look at labels or ingredient lists when you are buying self-care products?

Response	Pre-Workshop	Post-Workshop
Yes	70.7%	91.7%
Sometimes	22%	8.3%
Occasionally	4.4%	0%
No	2.4%	0%

Do you know how to look for fragrances in a product by reading the ingredient list?

Before the workshop, we asked clients if they knew how to look for fragrances in a product by reading the list. After the workshop, we asked them if they would still purchase a product if they identified a fragrance in a product ingredient list.

Table 3: Question 3. Do you know how to look for fragrances in a product by reading the ingredient list?

Response	Pre-Workshop
Yes	26.8%
No	34.1%
I am not sure	39.1%

If you identified a fragrance in a product ingredient list, would you still purchase that product?

Table 4: Question 3. If you identified a fragrance in a product ingredient list, would you still purchase that product?

Response	Post-Workshop
Yes	8.3%
No	80.6%
I am not sure	11.1%

Do you think that some self-care products may contain harmful ingredients?

Table 5: Question 4. Do you think that some self-care products may contain harmful ingredients?

Response	Pre-Workshop	Post-Workshop
Yes	68.3%	83.3%
No	4.9%	5.6%
I am not sure	26.8%	11.1%

Do you think toxic chemicals in self-care products can cause long-term negative health impacts?

Table 6: Question 5. Do you think toxic chemicals in self-care products can cause long-term negative health impacts?

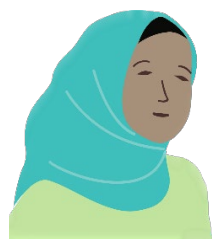
Response	Pre-Workshop	Post-Workshop
Yes	78%	97.2%
No	2.4%	0%
I am not sure	19.5%	2.8%

What are you hoping to learn today?

Table 7: Question 6. What are you hoping to learn today?

Response	Pre-Workshop	Post-Workshop
New information about self-care products	26.5%	23.9%
How to protect myself from toxic chemicals in care products	35.3%	38.2%
What to look for on product labels	17.6%	18%
How to make homemade safer recipes	35.3%	20.2%

Feedback From Participants



I have a three-year-old daughter, and I've noticed she's starting to experience hair loss in a way that worries me. The doctor suggested I change the shampoo I use for her. I didn't know how to do that, so this workshop was very useful and helped me understand the harmful ingredients in personal care products. So, I will make sure to avoid these harmful chemical products while buying any self-care products for me and my family.

Following the workshop, Mother Africa asked for feedback from workshop participants and received several replies.

- It was an informative workshop, thank you.

- I have always believed that shampoo contains harmful chemicals, so I avoided using it for many years and only used hair conditioner. I learned from the workshop that hair conditioners may also contain harmful substances such as those found in shampoo. I will read the ingredients before purchasing next time.
- I know that personal care products contain chemicals that may be harmful, but I did not know how to identify them or how to avoid them. Thank you for holding this workshop. I benefited a lot.
- I am impressed with the organic recipe for exfoliation. My skin is softer. I will try it again instead of chemical products.
- As a housewife, I always try to save on expenses, but I also care about my family's health. I will try to search for the safest personal care products, and affordable as well.
- I benefited a lot from today's workshop. I am interested in more workshops. (Later, this community member said they were interested in more opportunities to learn about cosmetics, including personal care products for kids and items like mineral oil.)
- I have a three-year-old daughter, and I've noticed she's starting to experience hair loss in a way that worries me. The doctor suggested I change the shampoo I use for her. I didn't know how to do that, so this workshop was very useful and helped me understand the harmful ingredients in personal care products. So, I will make sure to avoid these harmful chemical products while buying any self-care products for me and my family.

Lessons Learned

Ecology and Mother Africa identified several takeaways from the workshops that could be relevant to future collaborations or workshops held by the organizations.

- 1) The Mother Africa team adopted a new strategy to overcome a technological barrier facing most participants. Mother Africa developed concise and easy to understand survey questions and, during one-on-one phone calls, helped community members fill out the surveys using a Google form.
- 2) Community members asked a lot of questions and expressed concerns about the products they are using. Several participants asked if there is a logo they can look for that will help them determine if products are safe to use. Unfortunately, there is a logo but it is not widely used, even on many products that we might consider safer. Consumers need to read the ingredients list.
- 3) Workshop participants asked a lot of technical questions related to chemicals. It was great to have a subject matter expert from Ecology attend the workshops to answer the questions.
- 4) The Mother Africa team faced a challenge when one of the registered workshop participants was unable to attend due to an emergency. To ensure the client received

the information, Mother Africa held a one-on-one session with the client, following the same approach as the community workshops.

- 5) Participants were excited to learn and try a face and body scrub recipe, and they said they want to learn more.
- 6) The Mother Africa team learned that the community they serve may have inaccurate information about personal care product safety. They benefitted from learning about the behaviors to change for the better, so they can continue to share the information and experience with their community.
- 7) Participants learned how to choose safer personal care products, use recipes for safer personal care products to make at home, and advocate for themselves.
- 8) Ecology needs to give their community partners enough time to review presentation materials to ensure messaging is relatable to the intended audience. This is especially true for materials they intend to give to community members.
- 9) Ecology and their community partners should work together to identify the best ways to communicate with specific communities (e.g., in-person or virtual meetings; an independent project or participating in a larger meeting with multiple agencies).
- 10) Ecology can improve their technical support for remote workshops, (e.g., adding and using translated captions on shared videos). Workshop hosts should also have a backup plan for technical components (e.g., posting video links in the chat and asking participants to watch videos independently).
- 11) Technical staff should anticipate receiving questions on topics beyond presentation contents (e.g., other chemicals in products that might be hazardous or what to do with products people currently have in their homes).
- 12) Meeting hosts should make sure there are processes in place to incorporate and address feedback heard during the workshops. Ecology and community partners, like Mother Africa, should let workshop attendees know how their feedback was used and how to continue receiving information and resources if they are interested.
- 13) Ecology should leverage other partnerships and funding sources and act as a point of connection between groups when possible.