

CSCB BRIEFINGS

TITLE: Safeguarding Girls from Breast Ironing or Breast Flattening

DATE: April 2016



1 Introduction

1.1 Breast Ironing or Breast Flattening is a traditional practice cited mainly from Cameroon, but girls in some other African countries are also affected. It is the process by which girls aged usually 9-15 years, have their breasts ironed, massaged or pounded down through the use of hard or heated objects. The process may involve large stones, a hammer or spatulas. This is in order to compress the breast so these disappear or to put off the development of the breasts. Those who come from richer families may use an elastic belt to press the breasts. Breast ironing is painful; it can interrupt a girl's normal development and can cause long term physical damage.

1.2 The practice is maintained by the view that if girls retain a flat and child-like chest, this will discourage unwanted male attention and avoid sexual harassment - even rape, premarital pregnancy, abduction or early forced marriage. Breast ironing is understood to mainly take place in secret between the young girl and her mother and is supported by elder women within the family and community. The father may remain completely unaware of what is happening.

1.3 The United Nations (UN) states that Breast Ironing affects around 3.8 million women around the world and has been identified as one of the five under-reported crimes relating to gender-based violence. The UN reports that, "It is widely spread in West African countries such as Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Togo, Benin, and Guinea-Conakry but also occurs in some regions of East and Central Africa. In Cameroon, up to 50% of girls as young as 10 years old undergo terribly painful breast ironing on a daily basis."

For more information go to:

www.unwomenuk.org/breast-ironing-must-be-stopped

1.4 Breast Ironing is a harmful practice and is child abuse. The extent to which girls in this country are affected by breast ironing or flattening is unknown. Professionals working with children and young people must be able to identify the signs and symptoms of girls who are at risk of or have undergone breast ironing.

2 Indicators of Harm

- 2.1 Some indicators that a girl has undergone breast ironing are:
- Unusual behaviour after an absence from school and may appear depressed, anxious or withdrawn
 - Reluctance to undergo normal medical examinations
 - Fear of changing for physical activities due to scars showing or bandages being visible
 - Some girls may ask for help, perhaps worried about their chest area, but may not be explicit about the problem due to embarrassment or fear.

3 Health and Developmental Implications

- 3.1 Due to the type of instruments that may be used, the type of force and the lack of aftercare, young girls are vulnerable to significant health and developmental risks, such as:
- Cancer
 - Abscesses
 - Cysts
 - Itching
 - Tissue damage
 - Infection
 - Discharge of milk
 - Dissymmetry of the breasts
 - Severe fever
 - Even the complete disappearance of one or both breasts.
- 3.2 There may be an impact on the girl's social and psychological wellbeing. The girl may believe that the practice is for her own good and therefore be compliant even though it causes pain and discomfort.

4 Further Information

- 4.1 Cawogido is a leading charity in this area and have produced some helpful information and guidance regarding the issues. They are working with the associated communities in this country to end the practice.

www.cawogido.co.uk

www.cawogido.co.uk/breastironing.php