**Breast ironing**

**A Glover Williams, F Finlay**

You might have heard of breast ironing as it has recently peaked the media’s interest, but what is basis behind this? Breast ironing is one of the five United Nations (UN) under-reported crimes relating to gender-based violence and is estimated to affect at least 1,000 women and girls in West African communities across the UK.1 In reality this figure could be much higher but the custom is extremely secretive and there is no official data on how widespread practice is.

Breast ironing is the process during which pubescent girls’ developing breasts are ironed, massaged, flattened or pounded down over a period of time, to try to delay or stop the development of the breasts. Heated objects, such as large stones are typically used whilst others may use an elastic belt or binder to press the breasts aiming to prevent them from growing. Breast ironing is typically carried out when girls are aged between 9 and 15 years of age in correlation with the initiation of thelarche and is often performed in secret by female family members.2

As well as causing severe pain, other significant health problems may occur including development of abscesses, cysts, infections, itching, fever, discharge of milk and tissue damage with even complete disappearance of the breasts.3 Many victims report inverted nipples and are subsequently unable to breastfeed their children. It may also cause social and psychological harm to young girls. Unfortunately rates of these complications are unquantifiable as the practice itself is drastically under-reported. There is also a potential for the resulting chronic inflammatory response of breast ironing to manifest an increased risk of breast cancer but again there is as yet no quantifiable data to this end.

According to UN estimates, up to 3.8 million girls worldwide are affected. Breast ironing is practiced particularly in the West African nations of Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Togo and Benin, however it has also been reported in Leeds, Wolverhampton, Essex and West Midlands.4 In Cameroon, the only country where there has been a quantitative attempt at data collection, up to 25 per cent of women aged 10-82 years of age were found to have undergone breast ironing. The survey emphasises the scale and cultural integration of the problem faced.

Breast ironing is understood to be carried out in the belief that it will make young girls less sexually appealing and therefore prevent their appearance from encouraging sexual relationships prior to marriage, and potentially protect them from sexual harassment, sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy.3 The translation of traditional, conservative (typically Christian) African beliefs into an increasingly liberalised, Western world can potentiate a family’s concerns about early sexual experiences and the action of breast ironing can be intended to be protective rather than abusive.

Recent updates by the Crown Prosecution Service declare that breast ironing is a physical abuse that will carry an up to 10 year prison sentence even if the victim is said to have consented. 5 A proactive approach must be taken and if professionals are concerned that a child is at risk they must follow their local safeguarding procedures by making an urgent Multi-Agency-Safeguarding-Hub referral. As lead by the example of UK-based CAME Women’s and Girl’s Development Organisation we must educate communities against the practice to try to protect children. Schools should also raise awareness of breast ironing as part of PSHE education to inform children of their rights to protection from violence or abuse under the UN convention on the rights of the child and empower them to resist the practice.

The signs of breast ironing are challenging to spot and children are unlikely to report that they have had it done for fear of embarrassment, discrimination and persecution of their parents. It is important therefore to see all children alone at least at some point in consultation to enable disclosures to be made.

The signs that a girl could be at risk of breast ironing/flattening are:8

* The parents, siblings or elders of the girl have undergone or participated in breast ironing.
* The girl’s family originate from Western Africa and feel that it is integral to their cultural identity
* She may be withdrawn from PSHE and/or Sex and Relationship Education to keep her uninformed about her rights
* She may withdraw or be withdrawn from PE to prevent exposure through getting changed
* The family has limited integration within the UK community
* The girl starts puberty early (under the age of 10yrs)
* She shows embarrassment about her body

We may be exposed to the victims of breast ironing in a number of ways: 8

* Presentation with pain or discomfort in the chest area, but may not be explicit about the aetiology
* Presentation with breast abscesses or cysts (potentially after the breast ironing has been ceased)
* A reluctance to undergo medical examination, particularly exposure of the chest
* Psychiatric presentations with Western African heritage.

In summary breast ironing is happening in the UK and is a safeguarding issue. It is likely that this practice is under-recognised and causing extensive on-going health and psychological wellbeing consequences for victims. We will only recognise breast ironing if we are actively looking for it and this is essential if we are going to begin to quantify and address the issue.

**References**

**1.** Margaret Nyuydzewira, Head of CAME Women and Girls Development Organisation (Cawogido)

**2.** Eriksson L. Breast ironing in Cameroon; A Master Thesis. 2014, University of Gothenburg.

**3.** Tchoukou J. Review Article Open Access Introducing the Practice of Breast Ironing as a Human Rights Issue in Cameroon. J Civil Legal Sci 2014;3:121.

https://www.omicsonline.org/open-access/introducing-the-practice-of-breast-ironing-as-a-human-rights-issue-in-cameroon-2169-0170.1000121.php?aid=26082

**4.** Lazareva I. Revealed: 'dozens' of girls subjected to breast-ironing in UK. 2019, The Guardian.

5. Lazareva I. Breast-ironing is abuse and could lead to prison term, says CPS. 2019, The Guardian.

https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jul/19/breast-ironing-is-abuse-and-could-lead-to-prison-term-says-cps?