

Breast Ironing

Introduction

Breast Ironing also known as “Breast Flattening” is the process whereby young pubescent girls breasts are ironed, massaged and/or pounded down through the use of hard or heated objects in order for the breasts to disappear or delay the development of the breasts entirely. It is believed that by carrying out this act, young girls will be protected from harassment, rape, abduction and early forced marriage and therefore be kept in education.

Much like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Breast Ironing is a harmful cultural practice and is child abuse. 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. Similarly to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), breast ironing is classified as physical abuse therefore professionals must follow their Local Safeguarding Children’s Board Procedures.

Definition

The United Nations (UN) states that Breast Ironing affects 3.8 million women around the world and has been identified as one of the five under-reported crimes relating to gender-based violence (<http://www.unwomenuk.org/breast-ironing-must-be-stopped/>). The custom uses large stones, a hammer or spatulas that have been heated over scorching coals to compress the breast tissue of girls as young as 9 years old. Those who derive from richer families may opt to use an elastic belt to press the breasts so as to prevent them from growing.

The mutilation is a traditional practice from Cameroon designed to make teenage girls look less “womanly” and to deter unwanted male attention, pregnancy and rape. The practice is commonly performed by family members, 58% of the time by the mother (<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/HarmfulPractices/GenderEmpowermentandDevelopment.pdf>). In many cases the abuser thinks they are doing something good for their daughter, by delaying the effects of puberty so that she can continue her education, rather than getting married.

Law

There is no specific law within the UK around Breast Ironing, however it is a form of physical abuse and if professionals are concerned a child may be at risk of or suffering significant harm they must refer to their Local Safeguarding Children’s Board Procedures.

Local authorities should review their internal Violence against Women and Girls strategy and ensure it reflects breast ironing as a form of gender based violence.

The rights of women and girls are enshrined by various universal and regional instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf), the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf>), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (<http://www.humanrights.se/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/African-Charter-on-Human-and-Peoples-Rights.pdf>) and Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of Women in Africa (http://www.achpr.org/files/instruments/women-protocol/achpr_instr_proto_women_eng.pdf). All these documents highlight the right for girls and women to live free from gender discrimination, free from torture, to live in dignity and with bodily integrity.

There have been no prosecutions related to breast ironing and there are no figures available for the number of teenage girls who might be affected within the UK. CAME Women's and Girl's Development Organisation (Cawogido) is working in Cameroon and the UK to tackle the issue of breast ironing and believe that similarly to FGM the practice is happening but due to the hidden nature of the act it is difficult to detect.

Risks

The girl generally believes that the practice is being carried out for her own good and she will often remain silent. Young pubescent girls usually aged between 9 – 15 years old and from practising communities are most at risk of breast ironing.

Indicators

Breast ironing is a well-kept secret between the young girl and her mother. Often the father remains completely unaware. Some indicators that a girl has undergone breast ironing are as follows:

- Unusual behaviour after an absence from school or college including depression, anxiety, aggression, withdrawn etc;
- Reluctance in undergoing normal medical examinations;
- Some girls may ask for help, but may not be explicit about the problem due to embarrassment or fear;
- Fear of changing for physical activities due to scars showing or bandages being visible.

Issues

Where is it practiced?

Breast ironing is practiced in all ten regions of Cameroon and has been reported in Benin, Ivory Coast, Chad, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Togo, Zimbabwe and Guinea-Conakry. The charity CAWODIGO – CAME Women and Girls (<http://www.cawogido.co.uk/index.php>) is concerned that African immigrants have brought breast ironing practice with them to the UK. In their efforts to reduce the number of affected girls and women, CAME provides training for Cameroonian organisations working to protect girls from being abused through breast ironing and supporting families and communities.

Health consequences

Due to the instruments which are used during the process of breast ironing, for example, spoon/broom, stones, pestle, breast band, leaves etc. combined with insufficient aftercare, young girls are exposed to significant health risks. Breast ironing is painful and violates a young girl's physical integrity. It exposes girls to numerous health problems such as cancer, abscesses, itching, and discharge of milk, infection, dissymmetry of the breasts, cysts, breast infections, severe fever, tissue damage and even the complete disappearance of one or both breasts.

This form of mutilation not only has negative health consequences for the girls, but often proves futile when it comes to deterring teenage sexual activity according to CAME Women and Girls. The practice not only seriously damages a child's physical integrity, but also their social and psychological well-being.

Justifications

The practice is carried out under the misguided intention to “protect” women and girls from men's sexual harassment. These violent acts are not only perpetrated by men on women, but by older generations of women on young girls. In practicing communities, it is believed many boys and men believe girls whose breasts have grown are ready to have sex, therefore elders (mothers, grandmothers, aunties etc.) believe that by suppressing a girl's development of her breast she will be protected from rape, kidnapping, sexual harassment and early forced marriage.

Contact Us

To find out more about working with tri.x contact us on: Telephone: 024 7667 8053 or visit our website www.trixonline.co.uk.

Copyright: The content of this Briefing can be accessed, printed and downloaded in an unaltered form, on a temporary basis, for personal study or reference purposes. However any content printed or downloaded may not be sold, licensed, transferred, copied or reproduced in whole or in part in any manner or in or on any media to any person without the prior written consent of Signis Group.