

Breast Ironing - Safeguarding Resources and Advice

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. 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](#).