

Breast flattening/Breast ironing/ Breast pounding

Breast ironing, is known as **breast flattening**, is a traditional and cultural practice where the breasts of a pubescent girl are pounded and massaged using hard or heated objects. Breast bands are used to try to stop the development or to flatten the breasts completely

The rationale is to prevent breast development for girls between 9 -15 years old and to look less womanly in the belief that a flat childlike chest and appearance will discourage unwanted male attention, abduction, rape, early forced marriage and premarital pregnancy

Breast ironing or breast flattening is one of the most misguided forms of motherly love. It is a cruel and brutal practice towards girls 9 - 15 years to prevent male sexual harassment and thereby prevent pregnancy.

This is a deep seated cultural belief, like FGM, for the protection of girls however it is perpetuated and maintained by women, generally mothers and other women in the family or the community. No one talks about it and is a well-maintained secret between mother (practitioner) and girl child

Women do it and continue to do it with mistaken 'best protective intentions' with justification of culture, custom and religion. No religion prescribes this practice nor promotes it, it is simply a ritual of girl child abuse and violence against their body. A form of women on girls' violence and mutilation

The procedure involves using a stone, hammer or a spatula which have been heated over hot coals or stove. Breast bands may be used to suppress growth. It is a very painful process and is agonising for the girl child. This form of mutilation has negative health consequences for girls where the breasts are demolished

Current knowledge suggests it is practiced in Cameroon, other places where it is reported to being practiced are: Kenya, Congo, Zimbabwe, Togo, Chad, Ivory Coast, and Guinea-Bissau. It is a practice that has been brought to the west by the African Diaspora.

United Nations reports that 3.8 million women are affected globally and in 58% of cases the abuser is the mother. The UN has listed the ritual as one of five under-reported crimes relating to sexual violence.

In the UK there are no figures yet to highlight the scale of the problem as it is just emerging as an issue of abuse.

Health consequences can be significant. It exposes girls to abscesses, cancer infections, itching, and dissymmetry of breasts, cysts, tissue damage, fevers and complete disappearance of one or both breasts. This damages a child's physical integrity and emotional and mental wellbeing. In the long term this may mean inability to breast feed.

Indicators that a girl has undergone or is undergoing breast ironing;

Unusual behavior at school after an absence from school

Anxiety or withdrawn or feeling depressed

Refuses any routine medical examinations

Refuses to change or be engaged in physical activities due to scars or bandages or bands

Avoiding any contact with anyone around upper arm or shoulder and hugging

Legislation

There is no legislation specifically on breast ironing in the UK. However it is a form of child abuse and therefore safeguarding policies and procedures apply. Professionals need to be aware of this issue and if there are concerns about any child at risk or suffering any harm they must seek advice and / or refer to the local multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)

References

1. www.trixonline.co.uk
2. www.unwomenuk.org