

Breast Ironing

**Warning: contains sensitive information which some readers may find upsetting*

What is breast ironing?

Breast ironing, which is also known as 'breast flattening', is traditionally practiced in parts of Africa. Research suggests that one in four girls living in Cameroon will have undergone breast ironing as they reach puberty (aged 8 – 12 years) and begin to develop breasts. The United Nation (UN) estimates, up to 3.8 million girls worldwide are affected. Breast ironing is particularly widespread in the West African nations of Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Togo and Benin. It is considered by the Home Office to be a 'harmful cultural practice'.

The practice is meant to prevent breast development in girls and in so doing decreases the likelihood of them being exposed to sexual harassment and, or rape. It is also used to discourage sexual intercourse outside of marriage, to discourage pregnancy and counteract against girls marrying at a young age.

What does the practice involve?

Breast ironing involves heated objects, including stones and hammers to flatten and beat the breast of young girls. The heated objects are used to pound and massage the breasts in order to restrict breast growth. Often girls are held down by adults, usually the girls' mother, and experience tremendous pain and trauma during the procedure. Once the flattening has taken place with use of various tools and implements, the girls' breasts are bound with tight bandages to further reduce their size and development.

How does breast ironing affect a girl's health and well-being?

In addition to the physical pain and emotional trauma caused by breast ironing, it also causes:

- Burns and bruising
- Long term scarring
- Malformation of the breasts
- Infections
- Damage to breast tissue
- Problems in breast feeding
- Mastitis
- Psychological illnesses both short and long-term



What does the law say about breast ironing?

Breast ironing is seen as a form of child abuse. In July 2019 changes to already existing legislation 'So-called honour- based abuse and forced marriage' made it possible for prosecutions to take place as a result of breast ironing practices. The law takes into account that action will be taken even if consent from the girl was given stating that 'responsible adults who aid and abet a girl, as the victim, in breast flattening should also be considered for investigation and prosecution.' (Crown Prosecution Service)

Does breast ironing happen in the UK?

As with other incidents of child abuse, breast ironing often takes place in secret and without anyone knowing about it. As communities move from other countries to the UK it is thought that there are a number of girls who are at risk of breast ironing.

What should I do if I am concerned that a girl is at risk of or has experienced breast ironing?

Local safeguarding partners and local authorities often provide advice and information that is available on their websites about specific local priorities that settings should be mindful of. Concerns about the welfare or safety of any child should be reported immediately to statutory services. This is either the police if it is believed that the child is in immediate danger, or children's services social care. Always follow procedure and take advice from other agencies if you are unsure about what to do.