

7 Minute Briefing – Breast flattening (also known as breast ironing)

1 Background

- There has not been extensive research done on breast flattening and the few studies that have been carried out indicate that the practice occurs predominantly in Cameroon. Other countries include: Togo, Chad, Kenya, Guinea Bissau, South Africa, Cote d'Ivoire, Benin and Zimbabwe.
- The United Nations (UN) states that Breast Ironing affects approx. 3.8 million women around the world.

2 What is it?

- 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.

3 Health implications

Due to the type of instruments that may be used, the type of force and the lack of aftercare, significant health and developmental issue may occur:

- Severe pain, fever, tissue damage, infection.
- Increased risk of breast cancer, abscesses or cysts.
- Impact on a child's social and psychological well-being.
- Difficulties with breast feeding in motherhood.

4 The Law:

- Although there is no specific law within the UK around breast flattening or breast ironing, it is a form of physical abuse.

5 Unique Considerations

In many cases, the abuser thinks they are doing something good for the girl by delaying the effects of puberty and the practice is designed to:

- Prevent pregnancy and rape.
- Make teenage girls look less “womanly” and no-longer sexually attractive to men.
- Enable the girl to continue her education.
- Prevent dishonour being brought upon the family if the girl begins sexual relations outside of marriage.
- Deter unwanted attention.

6 Signs that a girl could be at risk of or experiencing Breast Flattening / Ironing:

- A girl is born to a woman/ has family members who have undergone breast flattening.
- If there are references to breast flattening in conversation.
- A girl from an affected community is withdrawn from PSHE and/or Sex and Relationship Education as her parents wish to keep her uninformed about her rights.
- One or both parents or elder family members consider breast flattening integral to their cultural identity.
- The family indicate that there are strong levels of influence held by elders who are involved in bringing up female children and support breast flattening.
- A girl may be fearful of changing for physical activities due to scars showing or bandages being visible.

7 Challenge/thinking – posing questions to trigger discussion

- What would you do differently if working with a cultural belief in breast flattening?
- How can we be culturally curious?
- What resources could we consider?

Resources:

- National FGM Centre – information on breast flattening and prevalence map - <https://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/breast-flattening/>
- Exploring culture, faith and belief questions - <https://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Culture-and-Faith-Question-Guide-PDF.pdf>
- Breast Flattening/ Ironing - Lucy talks about her experience of undergoing Breast Ironing in Cameroon and the effect it has had on her. <https://youtu.be/jUsP3ZjFrU8>
- Breast Flattening/ ironing animation - https://youtu.be/imCmlG3_3tc
- National FGM Centre – Breast Flattening/ Ironing leaflet - <https://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/About-Breast-Flattening-Leaflet-.pdf>
- Breast Ironing fact sheet - <https://aho.org/fact-sheets/breast-ironing-fact-sheet/>
- Afruca – safeguarding children booklets (Physical abuse, child abuse etc..) <https://afruca.org/publications>