













What is Breast Ironing?

Breast Ironing, also known as breast flattening, is the pounding and massaging of a young girl's breasts in order to prevent and/or stunt breast development. This is usually carried out through pressing, massaging, or pounding the breasts using hard or heated objects. Breast Flattening is a traditional practice in areas of West Africa, and it is typically performed by the girl's mother or female family member. The act of Breast Flattening is done in order to make the girl less attractive to males, reduce the risk of sexual harassment and rape, discourage pre-marital sex, reduce the risk of unwanted pregnancy, and prevent early marriage. The United Nations estimate that nearly 4 million girls are affected by this practice. Other research has identified that in Cameroon the statistic is as high as 1 in 4 girls have undergone the process. It is estimated that around 1,000 girls in the UK have been subjected to this practice.

Some of the effects from Breast Ironing

-  Severe pain
-  Fever
-  Dissymmetry or disappearance of breast(s)
-  Itching
-  Tissue Damage
-  Infection
-  Discharge of milk
-  Increased risk of Breast Cancer
-  Abscesses or cysts
-  Burning and scarring
-  Interference with breastfeeding
-  Psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, PTSD



One Minute Guide

Breast Ironing

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Breast Flattening within the United Kingdom

There is no law against breast ironing within the United Kingdom, however it is considered to be a form of physical abuse.

If a child or young person discloses that they have had this practice done to them or it is planned, you must immediately report your concerns to the local children's services and safeguarding team. Within Coventry you should report any concerns to the MASH team. They can be contacted on **02476788555**, or email at **mash@coventry.gov.uk**

Signs that Breast Ironing may have taken place

You will find a list containing some of the signs that breast ironing/flattening may have taken place. Individually these signs may not be concrete proof. For any concerns, please contact the MASH team to report.

A girl may disclose to a teacher, social worker, GP or another medical professional

Some girls may ask for help, perhaps talk about pain or discomfort in their chest area, but may not be explicit about the problem due to embarrassment or fear

A girl may display reluctance to undergo medical examination

A girl may be fearful of changing for physical activities due to scars showing or bandages being visible

A girl's own mother, sibling or cousin may have undergone Breast Ironing.

The family indicate that there are strong levels of influence held by elders who are involved in bringing up female children and support Breast Ironing.

Why does breast ironing occur

Breast ironing, or breast flattening, is a cultural practice that originates from African countries. It is classified as an 'Honour-based violence' or HBV, and it is a gender-based violence. This practice generally affects girls between the ages of 9 and 15 years of age, as they approach puberty, and their bodies may start to develop. Although this practice is done on girls and young women, the consequences can last for a lifetime and the psychological impact on the woman can be very damaging.

The purpose of this practice is to control the bodies of developing young women in order to limit their sexuality. In countries such as Cameroon, where this practice is very common, pre-marital sex or the loss of virginity can be seen to tarnish the family name. By performing a breast ironing procedure, the families believe that they are aiding the young girl in avoiding the attention of other males, and therefore helping the family name by being able to better marry. The patriarchal society believes this practice to be in the best interests of both the child, but also of the family name.

The procedure is often carried out by the female relatives in the family, such as a mother or aunt, and the child may not know that they are a victim. With the practice being so common, these children grow up believing this to be a normal and necessary practice.

Within the UK there is no specific law against breast-ironing, however it is classed as child abuse through physical abuse. As an HBV, it is regarded similarly to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and is treated very seriously. Any cases of breast-ironing on children, or plans for this to occur, must be treated very seriously and reported to children's services as well as the local safeguarding team.

Survivor stories



" I started growing breasts when I was 10. My mother explained to my sister that I was growing breasts too early and that I would attract boys. "

These accounts have been taken from the [National FGM website](#), for more information please visit their pages and check their available [leaflet](#).

" My mother took a pestle, she warmed it well in the fire and then she used it to pound my breasts while I was lying down. She took the back of a coconut, warmed it in the fire and used it to iron the breasts. I was crying and trembling to escape but there was no way. "



Key Contacts and Further Information

[Coventry Safeguarding Children Partnership](#)

[Childline](#)

[National FGM Centre](#)

[Metropolitan Police](#)

[Safeguarding Hub](#)

[FGM Awareness Webinar Coventry City Council](#)