

Warwickshire Safeguarding Children Board

Briefing paper—Breast Ironing

Dear Colleagues,

Please see read and share the information contained within this briefing paper. This is a new harmful practice we have become aware of and it is happening in the UK. WSCB are working with Warwickshire's VAWG board and the Harmful Practices Group to identify the prevalence of this across Warwickshire and share information and guidance for practitioners as soon as it become available.

Introduction & Definition

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. The practice is carried out under the misguided intention to “protect” women and girls from men’s sexual harassment. 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.

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. 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.

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 (<http://www.unwomenuk.org/breast-ironing-must-be-stopped/>).

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.

Law

There is no specific law within the UK around Breast Ironing, however it is a form of physical abuse and if you are concerned a child may be at risk of or suffering significant harm please refer to WSCB Interagency Procedures.

Indicators

- Breast ironing is a well-kept secret between the young girl and her mother. Often the father remains completely unaware. Some indicators that a girl has undergone breast ironing are as follows:
- Unusual behaviour after an absence from school or college including depression, anxiety, aggression, withdrawn etc;
- Reluctance in undergoing normal medical examinations;
- Some girls may ask for help, but may not be explicit about the problem due to embarrassment or fear;
- Fear of changing for physical activities due to scars showing or bandages being visible.

Where is it practiced?

Breast ironing is practiced in all ten regions of Cameroon and has been reported in Benin, Ivory Coast, Chad, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Togo, Zimbabwe and Guinea-Conakry. The charity CAWODIGO – CAME Women and Girls (<http://www.cawogido.co.uk/index.php>) is concerned that African immigrants have brought breast ironing practice with them to the UK. In their efforts to reduce the number of affected girls and women, CAME provides training for Cameroonian organisations working to protect girls from being abused through breast ironing and supporting families and communities.

It is thought around 1,000 girls are thought to currently be at risk in the UK (United Nations).

Health consequences

Due to the instruments which are used during the process of breast ironing, for example, spoon/broom, stones, pestle, breast band, leaves etc. combined with insufficient aftercare, young girls are exposed to significant health risks.

Breast ironing is painful and violates a young girl's physical integrity. It exposes girls to numerous health problems such as cancer, abscesses, itching, and discharge of milk, infection, dissymmetry of the breasts, cysts, breast infections, severe fever, tissue damage and even the complete disappearance of one or both breasts.

This form of mutilation not only has negative health consequences for the girls, but often proves futile when it comes to deterring teenage sexual activity according to CAME (a charity CAWODIGO – CAME Women and Girls). The practice not only seriously damages a child's physical integrity, but also their social and psychological well-being.