

## 1.14.20 Breast Ironing Awareness

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### Regulations and Standards

#### England

- [Regulation 12: The protection of children standard](#)
- [Guide to the protection of children standard](#)

#### Wales

- [Regulation 27: Safeguarding policies and procedures](#)  
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2017/1264/regulation/27/made>

### Guidance

- [Multi-agency statutory guidance on female genital mutilation](#)
- <http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/breast-flattening/>

### 1. Introduction

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The violence against women (VAW) is a world-wide menace affecting millions of women and girls of all beliefs, culture, socio-economic strata, educational levels and other diversity. It is known a human rights concern that reveals itself in physical, psychological, sexual, social and cultural forms. Violence is the result of the intricate interplay of individual, relational, social, cultural and environmental factors. Violence against women has severe effects which include the loss of self-esteem, physical, mental and psychological health. It has great effect on the girl's physical and mental wellbeing; it could make the girls lose their pride and self-worth.

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 Partnerships Procedures.

### 2. Definition of Breast Ironing

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“the process during which young pubescent girls' breasts are ironed, massaged, flattened and/or pounded down over a period of time (sometimes years) in order for the breasts to disappear or delay the development of the breasts entirely.”

Breast ironing is also known as breast flattening. It is a deliberate mutilation process of pounding and massaging the breast of a pubescent girl using hard and heated objects with a view of stopping the development or a complete disappearance of the breast. Breast ironing is a secretive and cruel form of mutilation. The objects used for this practice include plantains, wooden pestles, spatulas, coconut shells and grinding stones over heated coals. This excruciating form of mutilation does not only have negative health issues but it has also proven futile when it comes to discouraging teenage sexual activity. The basis is to prevent the girls from developing breasts in the belief that a flat chest will discourage unwanted male attraction, rape and pre-marital pregnancy. This is performed on girls between the ages of eight and sixteen who have started developing breast in an attempt to make them look less matured/womanly. However, the rationale behind breast ironing (to protect young girls from sexual advances) conflicts with the reality that these girls can still become pregnant. Irrespective of the location, religion, or ethnicity, the risk of undergoing breast ironing doubles amongst girls who show signs of puberty before the age of nine.

### **3. Trend of Breast Ironing Practice**

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It is usually carried out and done by the girl's mother or other female relatives; sisters, aunt, grandmothers, nanny or guardian as a way of precluding the girl from being sexually abused or harassed, to avoid early pregnancy or from being dropped-out of school. This process involves distending, squashing, cutting, and pounding of the chest of the pubescent girl with hot object with the purpose of mutilating the breast tissue to make them look less womanly. This practice is usually done in the home without the knowledge of outsiders. This practice is commonly done in Central Africa chiefly in Cameroon and West Africa especially Nigeria, Togo, the Republic of Guinea and South Africa and also in Britain. In Cameroon, it is believed that boys and men think girls are ready for sex when they have breasts. Even in Britain, there is a great percentage risk of breast ironing; health authorities and the police are on-board concerning this issue of breast ironing in Britain.

### **4. Health Issues**

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Breast ironing is a very painful and traumatising process and it damages the breast tissues. Breast ironing can contribute to a number of different physiological problems such as pain, high fever, abscesses in the breast, breasts pimples on and around the nipples, cysts in the breasts, itching of breasts, severe chest pain, flow of breast milk and/or contamination in breasts as a result of scarification. Other effects might include breast infection, malformed breasts or complete eradication of one or both breasts; it is simply an abhorrent practice.

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, such as:

Abscesses

Cysts

Itching

Tissue damage

Infection

Discharge of milk

Dissymmetry of the breasts

Severe fever

Even the complete disappearance of one or both breasts.

There may also be an impact on the child's social and psychological well-being.

## **5. Predominance**

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Breast ironing is a physical abuse of a female pubescent developing breasts. Around 3.8 million women and girls are affected by this in the world as reported by the UN. About 58% of these cases are caused by parent (more often mother) preventing their girls from being attracted by/to men or boys. According to violence research, 'family violence' refers to many forms of cruelty, mistreatment or neglect that children and adults may experience in their family or dependent relationships. However, breast ironing may be considered as a type of family violence since the practice is enforced to the young girls without their approval.

## **6. Reporting Arrangements**

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All staff must report concerns relating to breast ironing. The procedure is based upon the principles of the **Whistleblowing Policy**, which puts into practice and extends the provisions of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. Where children are concerned, a disclosure should be treated as a child protection issue and reported to the Designated Child Protection Officer in the most appropriate way. Suitable action will then be taken in consultation with the Local Authority.

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## **Revision History**

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**End**