



Coventry Safeguarding Children Board: Briefing on Breast Ironing

Background

Breast ironing, also known as breast flattening, is the pounding and massaging of a pubescent girl's breasts using hard or heated objects, to try to make them stop developing or to disappear. Breast Ironing is typically carried out by the girl's mother with the belief that she is protecting the girl from sexual harassment and rape, or to prevent early pregnancy that would tarnish the family name, or to allow the girl to pursue education rather than be forced into early marriage.

The practice has been documented primarily in Cameroon, but is also practiced in Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Togo, Benin, and Guinea.

Breast ironing is extremely painful and can cause tissue damage. Other possible health impacts include breast infections, the formation of abscesses, malformed breasts or the eradication of one or both breasts. The practice ranges dramatically in its severity, from using heated leaves to press and massage the breasts, to using a scalding grinding stone to crush the budding gland. Due to the range of this activity, health consequences vary from limited to significant.

Global Prevalence

The UN estimates 3.8 million young women are at risk of breast ironing in Central and West Africa. It is widespread in Cameroon and other African countries.

National Prevalence

Around 1,000 girls in the UK are currently thought to be at risk of breast ironing. According to a UN report, 58 per cent of perpetrators are the victims' own mothers.

Prevalence in Coventry

It is estimated that 200 residents of all ages, males and females living in Coventry in 2011 were born in Cameroon.¹

This estimate comes from:

- There were 8,218 people born in countries categorised under 'Central and Western Africa: Other Central and Western Africa' in the whole of the West Midlands – 1,584 of whom lived in Coventry, 19.3%
- There were 1,123 people born in Cameroon living in the whole of the West Midlands – 19.3% of this is 216, rounded to 200.

Other data suggests that this number may have grown but only modestly since 2011. The National Insurance Registration data from DWP shows an average of about 30 Cameroon nationals living in Coventry newly registering per year.

Coventry's Community Development Service work with new communities and they are aware of Kenyan, Somali, Zimbabwean and other 'African French speaking communities' which may include communities that practice breast ironing.

¹ Source: Estimate made by Insight using Census 2011 figures, ONS Crown Copyright.



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Professional Responsibilities

The data shows that whilst numbers will be small there may be women and girls living in Coventry who have been affected by, or are at risk of, breast ironing.

Although not explicitly considered currently under legislation, practitioners need to be aware of this practice. Breast ironing is physical abuse therefore professionals who are aware that a child has been affected by or are at risk of breast ironing must act in the best interest of protecting the child/young person and follow local safeguarding procedures.

Guidance produced: April 2016