

Signs that breast flattening has occurred

As well as keeping in mind the signs that indicate a girl may be at risk of breast flattening, professionals and others should be mindful that:

- 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

Law in the UK

There are no specific laws in the UK regarding breast flattening.

What to do if you suspect a girl is at risk of/undergoing breast flattening

If you are concerned that a girl is at risk of breast flattening, a referral must be made to the local children's services safeguarding team as it is a form of child abuse.

If you are concerned that the girl is in **immediate danger**, contact the police by calling 999.

You should also contact the Foreign and Commonwealth Office if the girl has been taken abroad:

- telephone: 020 7008 1500
- from overseas: +44 (0)20 7008 1500



For more information about any aspect of the Centre's work, please contact the National FGM Centre:

 info@nationalfgmcentre.org.uk

 www.nationalfgmcentre.org.uk



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Breast Flattening

An overview



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Breast Flattening

What is it?

Breast flattening, also known as breast ironing, is the process during which young pubescent girls' breasts are **ironed, massaged, flattened and/or pounded down** over a period of time (ranging from a few weeks to years) in order for the breasts to disappear or delay the development of the breasts entirely.

In some families, large stones, a hammer or spatula that have been heated over hot coals can be used to compress the breast tissue. Other families may opt to use an elastic belt or binder to press the breasts to prevent them from growing.

Breast flattening usually starts with the **first signs of puberty**, and is usually carried out by female relatives.

“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.” (Survivor)

It should also be acknowledged that some adolescent girls and boys may choose to bind their breast using constrictive material due to gender transformation or questioning their identity, and this may also cause health problems.

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, such as:

- Severe Pain
- Fever
- Dissymmetry or disappearance of breast/s
- Itching
- Tissue damage
- Infection
- Discharge of milk
- Breast cancer
- Abscesses or cysts

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

“I wanted to go to school like other girls who had no breasts” (Survivor)

Justifications

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
- prevent early marriage
- deter unwanted attention

“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.” (Survivor)

Prevalence

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.

Signs that a girl could be at risk

- A girl is embarrassed about her body
- A girl is born to a woman who has undergone breast flattening
- A girl has an older sibling or cousin who has undergone breast flattening
- References to breast flattening in conversation, for example a girl may tell other children about it
- A girl may request help from a teacher or another adult if she is aware or suspects that she is at immediate risk
- 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 and her body.
- One of 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.