

WHAT IS BREAST FLATTENING/IRONING?

Breast flattening, also called breast ironing, involves the damaging of the breasts of girls approaching or going through puberty over a period of time, to make them disappear or delay their development. It is not a part of any culture, but instead a harmful practice and a violation of human rights.

What is breast flattening or ironing?

The breasts are ironed, massaged, flattened and/or pounded down over a period of time that may last from a few weeks to several years. People who undertake this harmful practice may use large stones, a hammer or a spatula that has been heated over hot coals to compress the breast tissue. Others may use an elastic belt or binder to compress the breasts and prevent them from growing.

Breast flattening is usually done by female family or community members at the first signs of puberty. Perpetrators often wrongly believe that the practice will delay the effects of puberty and make them look less “womanly” so they will no longer be sexually attractive to men, deterring unwanted attention.

Why is breast flattening/ironing practiced?

The abuser thinks that they are protecting the child by delaying the effect of puberty. They may also believe that breast flattening/ironing will:

- Prevent rape
- Prevent pregnancy and early marriage
- Allow the girl to continue her education
- Prevent ‘dishonour’ being brought on the family/ community if the girl has sex outside of marriage
- Stop unwanted attention from men

Health Impact

Breast flattening/ironing involves the use of force and there is often limited aftercare, which can cause significant health issues, including:

- Severe pain
- Severe fever
- Abscesses and cysts
- Itching
- Tissue damage
- Infection
- Discharge of milk
- Breasts becoming significantly different shapes or sizes
- Complete disappearance of one or both breasts
- Psychological distress
- Mental health issues
- Social wellbeing issues

Breast Binding

While binders are sometimes used in breast flattening/ironing, they are also used by some children and teenagers who choose to bind their breasts due to questioning their gender identity or experiencing gender dysphoria (the discomfort or distress that a person may have because of a mismatch between their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity). However, if done incorrectly, breast binding can be dangerous and cause health issues.

Where does breast flattening/ironing occur?

Studies undertaken indicate a prevalence in Cameroon and occurrences in Togo, Chad, Kenya, Guinea, Bissau, South Africa, Côte d'Ivoire and Zimbabwe.

However, it is important to note that there has been very little research into the practice, so data is limited. Breast flattening/ironing is a 'hidden' practice and can happen anywhere, so it is important to be alert to indicators that a person is at risk or has been subjected to the practice.

Signs that someone might be a risk:

- They are embarrassed about their body
- Born into a family where the mother, siblings or other relatives have been subjected to breast flattening/ironing
- They talk about the practice to others
- They are from an affected community and have been withdrawn from Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) and/or Sex and Relationship Education classes, by their families, to keep them uninformed about their rights and body
- Parents and/or family members consider the practice to be integral to their culture
- There is evidence that their parents/family are influenced by community elders who support the practice

Signs that breast flattening/ironing has occurred:

- A disclosure may be made to a teacher, social worker, GP or other medical professional
- They may ask for help or talk about pain/discomfort in their chest area, but not be explicit about what has happened due to embarrassment, fear or lack of understanding
- They are reluctant to undergo medical examination
- They may be reluctant to get changed in front of others due to scars, bandages or binders being visible

The Law

There are no specific laws in the UK regarding breast flattening or ironing, but it is a form of child abuse and should be reported to the police.

If an individual case regarding the practice of breast flattening/ironing, or concern regarding the use of a breast binder, is reported to police, it will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Responding to Breast Flattening and Breast Ironing

If someone is at risk or under threat of breast flattening or ironing, or they have been subjected to the practice, you must report it to the police immediately.

FACT SHEET

For professionals:

- If the person is under 18 years old you must refer to children's social care
- Follow your organisational and local/national best practice policies and procedures
- Follow the ONE CHANCE RULE at all times. We believe there might only be one chance to safeguard someone at risk or under threat of breast flattening/ironing
- Hold an emergency strategy/professional meeting with relevant agencies (this should be immediately or within 24 hours)

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES

- Let the family, community or social network know about the disclosure
- Speak to the person at risk in front of family members or within the family home
- Approach the family or community leaders or attempt mediation
- Use members of the community to interpret
- Accidentally give out information which might jeopardise the person's safety

Caution is required about how information is shared, recorded, and safeguarded within the organisation. Information should only be shared on a need-to-know basis.

We will end 'honour'-based abuse and harmful practices

Helpline: **0800 107 0726**

10am - 4pm, Monday to Friday



To make a professional referral to Saveru UK, complete our online form:

saverauk.co.uk/get-help/referrals-for-professionals/

If you are an individual who needs help or advice, complete this form:

saverauk.co.uk/savera-uk-individual-referral-form/

In an emergency, please call 999.

Sources: National FGM Centre, Metropolitan Police