

POLICY BREIF

Ending Breast Ironing in Cameroon



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KEY MESSAGES

- * One out of every three girls is married before she turns 18 in Cameroon. More than 25 percent of girls are survivors of breast ironing in the country.
- * Breast Ironing is a performative practice that highlights the commodification of a woman's femininity and limits her identity solely to her physical development as a sign of female sexuality.
- * It is an activity of prolonging infantilisation of young and adolescent girls. This remains a strategy to maintain the status quo of hierarchical domination over such young girls and women. In a sense, flattening and mutilating the girl's breasts jeopardises her self-perception of her own womanhood.
- * Inter-generational clarity and awareness are recommended regarding the root causes and engaging men with comprehensive sexuality education such that the mystification of a woman's body does not amount to their sexist male gaze becoming a normalised feature in everyday living that pushes girls and women to undertake acts of self-mutilation or self-objectification.



What is Breast Ironing?

Breast ironing or breast flattening wherein the development of pubescent girls' body into womanhood is restricted by ironing their breasts with heated objects is prevalent in Cameroon. Such mutilation of breasts is done to arrest their development and disguised as a coping mechanism to prevent child marriage, unwanted child and teenage pregnancies, rape and abduction¹. The lure of continuing education also encourages the female family members to make young girls seem underdeveloped bodily to evade disruption of girls' education.

Breast Ironing violates the bodily integrity and dignity of young girls. It also gets cultural sanctions similar to Female Genital Mutilation. This cultural practice is positioned by its proponents as an advantage to the very young girls it seeks to violate! Breast ironing is carried out in the confines of one's kitchen to prevent the practice from coming into awareness of the male members of the household².

Global statistics on the prevalence of the practice

Around 3.8 million teenagers have been survivors of breast ironing globally as per estimates of the United Nations. The harmful cultural practice is common not only across West Africa but also in the UK - thus highlighting that it is not a geographically restrictive phenomenon, but a toxic normalisation of socialising girls into shaming their bodies³. Most prevalent in Cameroon, breast ironing practices have been commonly observed in Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Republic of Guinea, South Africa⁴.

Cameroon country statistics on the issue

In Cameroon, one out of every three girls is married before she turns 18⁵. Around a quarter to 50 percent of girls are survivors of breast ironing⁶. Cameroon reports more than 25 percent of girls as survivors of breast ironing. As per RENATA, breast ironing is highly prevalent among animists and Christians than in the Northern Cameroon, largely inhabited by Muslims⁷. Higher incidences of breast ironing have been observed in Central, Western, Northwest, Southwest and Coastal regions of Cameroon. The practice is extremely common in areas inhabited by Banyang, Akwaya, Ejagkam, Manyu, Bafut, Eton, Bamelike, Duala ethnic groups⁸.

¹<https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/609-breast-ironing.html#:~:text=The%20Committee%20urges%20the%20State%20party%20to%20enact,and%20breast%20ironing%20and%20their%20underlying%20cultural%20justifications.>

²<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8328&context=dissertations>

³<https://theconversation.com/breast-ironing-a-harmful-practice-that-doesnt-get-sufficient-attention-116206>

⁴<https://newint.org/features/2013/05/01/tales-of-taboo>

⁵<https://www.icrw.org/what-will-a-future-free-of-child-marriage-look-like-for-girls-in-cameroon/>

⁶<https://aho.org/fact-sheets/breast-ironing-fact-sheet/>

⁷<https://www.athensjournals.gr/health/2016-3-4-5-Vitalis-Pemunta.pdf>

⁸Drake, A. (2013). 'Not ready to be a woman': Exploring the adolescent perspective on 'breast ironing' in Cameroon, West Africa. 2013 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Psychological Anthropology, April 4-7, 2013, San Diego, CA. doi:10.1037/e570782013-047

Since 2017, due to the boycott of government education by Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs), every 2 out of 3 schools are non-operational⁹, thus school dropout for girls becomes more prominent. There is a high probability of spurring breast ironing practices if parents do not wish to coerce their girls into early marriage. That is why it becomes crucial to debase cultural justifications towards such a harmful practice. In a research published in 2012, Ndonko¹⁰ reveals that half of the instances of breast ironing are undertaken by mothers, 10% by nannies, 9% each by sisters and aunts, 7% by grandmothers and another 7% of such incidents are encouraged by the victims themselves. The same study states that 1 in 4 women in Cameroon have survived the atrocity of breast ironing.

What are the causes of/driving factors for Breast Ironing ?

- ⇒ The development of breasts is seen as a transition from girlhood to womanhood. In order to rescue the girls from the male gaze¹¹, the practitioners of breast ironing, very often within the family, indulge in brutalisation of breasts. It is advanced by its practitioners as a preventive measure for sexual harassment!
- ⇒ Breast development is seen as a signifier of adulthood¹² and therefore breast ironing is an activity of prolonging infantilisation of young and adolescent girls. This remains a strategy to maintain the status quo of hierarchical domination over such young girls and women. In a sense, flattening and mutilating the girl's breasts jeopardises her self-perception of her own womanhood. A mother's perception is of protecting her daughter from advances by sexual advances by boys and men¹³.
- ⇒ The anticipation of discontinuation in her education with the development of breasts as signifying the girl reaching the age of marriage and pregnancy; makes her parents justify objectifying her bodily integrity.
- ⇒ The ensuing stigma attached to sexual violence panicks parents into arranging early child marriages for their girls or those who do not wish to resort to such a coping strategy, take to inhibiting the natural growth of a girl's body by practices of breast ironing or female genital mutilation¹⁴. Parents perceive that early breast development gets associated with a girl reaching the age of attaining motherhood.

⁹<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Cameroon%20-2022%20Humanitarian%20response%20plan%20-HRP.pdf>

¹⁰Ndonko, F and Germaine, N (2006). Study on Breast Modeling in Cameroon. Yaounde: GTZ/RENATA 2006; pp 1-36. Ndonko, F., Innocent, M., Ngo'o, G., Soares, J. J., & Macassa, G. (2012). Breaking the Silence: Understanding the practice of Breast ironing in Cameroon. African Journal of Health Sciences

¹¹https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3040793

¹²G. Lisa Eriksson, 'Breast Ironing in Cameroon: A Harmful Practice Restricting Sexuality or a Means to Protect the Girl Child from Harm', unpublished Masters thesis, University of Gothenburg, (2014) 48.

¹³https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/handle/2077/37315/gupea_2077_37315_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹⁴<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/state-world-population-2020-against-my-will-defying-practices-harm-women-and-girls-and>



However, parents who fear early marriage, early pregnancy and discontinuation of their girl's education – take to breast ironing as a misguided coping method. We see that the cultural justifications are driven by insecurities and fear that are rooted in other societal impediments to young girls.

⇒ According to the United Nations, breast ironing constitutes one of the most underreported variants of gender-based violence. Female relatives or most often the mothers, are the one who executes the gender-based violence. This exercise of hypermasculinity by females over young girls, the female practitioners of breast ironing; ensnared by the male gaze and enmeshed in an honour-based patriarchal community¹⁵ become the proactive agent of exercising gender and honour based violence.

Breast Ironing as a human rights and gender issue

- ⇒ The constant surveillance, regulation and policing of a woman's body aligns with Foucault's conception of bio power and surveillance by the eroticized male gaze. This results in sexualisation of a woman's body, where none should have existed if the cultural stigma or taboo around comprehensive sexuality education had been in place in the first instance.
- ⇒ Eco systemic understanding of femininity or rather its misunderstanding is the major driving factor that facilitates breast ironing. A girl's home is itself not safe as breast ironing occurs within the confines of her own private sphere.
- ⇒ Breast ironing restricts the agency and dignity of the woman. There are evident data gaps regarding survivors of breast ironing due to the non-forthcoming nature of those who have survived breast ironing. The paucity of interviews from survivors of breast ironing as there are limitations in ethnographic studies regarding this form of gender-based violence due to self-shaming.
- ⇒ Placing the burden of guilt on practitioners blindly without understanding cultural contexts amounts to a shallow comprehension of the root causes of the horrific act of gender-based violence that breast ironing represents.
- ⇒ Specific bodily features become gendered due to discursive practices, gender is a lived process.
- ⇒ Practiced in the garb of protection of female bodies – breast ironing is a constraining, reiterative and restrictive practice across generations of women.
- ⇒ Breast ironing is an exercise in hyper-masculinity. Breast ironing is a performative practice that highlights the commodification of a woman's femininity and limits her identity solely to her physical development as a sign of female sexuality.

¹⁵<https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2885&context=jiws>

The health implications of Breast Ironing

Spatulas, hammers and stones are used to mutilate breast formation leading to breast asymmetry, increased incidence of breast cancer, cyst formation, permanent tissue damage, rupturing of bones and complete disappearance of one or both breasts¹⁶. This also results in the undernutrition of newborn children of such mothers, thus breast ironing has inter-generational repercussions. Thus, breast ironing has effects on nutritional security for the future generations.

Going beyond the invasion of physical integrity, the psychosocial consequences become undercurrents, sometimes lasting for generations. In order to discontinue the inter-generational passage of the shameful legacy of this cultural practice, we need to address the root causes that are used as disguises for justifying the coping method of breast flattening.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) leads to reluctance for medical examinations. Breast ironing is the horrific violence that exists in plain sight and remains the least talked about due to the honorification of the family and the community. While physical stressors linger for a lifetime, psychological ramifications remain as underlying currents¹⁷.

The legal framework against breast ironing

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 5 stipulates that all humans have the right to be free of torture and degrading treatment. UDHR also postulates that no individual shall be at the receiving end of degrading and inhuman treatment or punishment. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in Article 12, highlights that, “the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health”.

Article 4(1) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) includes the reproductive and sexual rights of the child. Across numerous articles namely, Article 3, 5(2), 10, 14 (1), the Charter cumulatively supports non-discrimination and child’s right to survival, privacy, protection, mental, physical and spiritual health. In order to eliminate the implicit cultural justifications regarding breast ironing, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women Cameroon, (CEDAW/C/CMR/CO/3 (2009) encouraged the Government of Cameroon to enact national legislation toward the prohibition of breast ironing. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts to end the harm caused by family, community faith-based organisations, health care providers in order to protect the rights of the child. The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its concluding observations for Cameroon in 2010¹⁸ encouraged the Government of Cameroon to outlaw the practice of breast ironing via legislation seeking the criminalization of the practice and the prosecution of the practitioners.

¹⁶<https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/2363-6270-2017-1-93/the-maputo-protocol-and-the-eradication-of-the-cultural-woes-of-african-women-a-critical-analysis-jahrgang-20-2017-heft-1?page=1>

¹⁷<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8005301/>

¹⁸<https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/CRC-C-CMR-CO-2.pdf>

The 2010 Committee Against Torture Concluding Observations for Cameroon¹⁹ reiterates the need to disseminate awareness across genders against the harmful practice of breast ironing of Cameroonian and refugee young girls.

In 2014²⁰, the joint recommendations as forwarded by Committee on Rights of the Child and Committee of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women; breast ironing has again been recognised as a harmful practice requiring urgent elimination. Breast Ironing is also in direct violation of the Convention Against Torture (CAT)²¹.

Interestingly, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples (Maputo Protocol), explicitly mentions Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as a harmful cultural practice worth eliminating, but skips outright condemnation of breast ironing by not highlighting this act of violence categorically.

Section 273(3) of the Penal Code in Cameroon indirectly criminalizes breast ironing, even though direct condemnation of the practice finds no mention.

“(1) Whoever involuntarily causes death by torture shall be punished with life imprisonment; (2) The penalty shall be imprisonment for from ten to twenty years where the torture causes a permanent deprivation of all or part of a limb, organ or sense.”

If sheer criminalization would have been the solution to such a harmful practice operated in the private sphere of people’s homes, then one would be skimming over the deeply entrenched causal effects.

Policy recommendations

- ⇒ Educate mothers about the continuum-based effects of breast ironing, thus discouraging short-term coping mechanisms and spotlighting the long-term ramifications accruing from breast ironing.
- ⇒ Inter-generational clarity and awareness regarding the root causes and engaging men with comprehensive sexuality education such that the mystification of a woman’s body does not amount to their sexist male gaze becoming a normalised feature in everyday living that pushes girls and women to undertake acts of self-mutilation or self-objectification.
- ⇒ Community outreach programmes that disseminate the de-hyphenating of the development of a woman’s body, her sexuality and her education trajectories. This will also disassociate child marriage from anything to do with the development of breasts of a girl.

¹⁹<https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cat/docs/co/CAT.C.CMR.CO.4.pdf>

²⁰CEDAW Joint General Recommendation No 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women / General Comment No18 of the Committee on the Right of the Child on harmful practices, CEDAW/C/GC/31-CRC/C/GC/18 (14 November 2014)

²¹<https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cat/docs/A-65-44.pdf>



- ⇒ Long-lasting trauma inhibits a young woman's potential for her future. Rehabilitation programmes must focus for enabling a woman to regaining her voice in her community
- ⇒ Eradicating the practice of breast ironing will not take place entirely if the practitioners are criminalised and prosecuted without debasing the practitioners' justifications in their psyche. Till then, prosecution will remain only mere tokenism with a greater propensity of gender-based violence becoming more clandestine.
- ⇒ If survivors of breast ironing are rehabilitated adequately, it may prevent their younger sisters in their family from undergoing similar trauma. Towards this end, the Government of Cameroon can adopt a resilient family and community based social infrastructure that condones the practice of breast ironing and debunks the cultural justifications for the same.
- ⇒ Explicit condemnation and criminalization of breast ironing in the Cameroon jurisdiction will result in enhanced mitigation of such a dehumanising practice.
- ⇒ Co-linking educational and informative campaigns against Female Genital Mutilation and Breast Ironing when it comes to community programmes as both forms of gender based violence are culturally justified by misogynistic gendered knowledge.
- ⇒ traditional healers, community health workers and midwives who may enable practices such as breast ironing need to be educated besides being provided alternate avenues for employment.



About Us

Constituted on 6th April 2016 as a non - profit organization and recently being awarded an ECOSOC status by the United Nations, we work with communities to bring diverse groups together and leverage their abilities, interests, and resources to engender shared values and benefits. We ensure local ownership of initiatives by working with communities to drive program design and implementation. We highly value developing a comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics in the communities where we implement our programs and interventions. At CCID, we aim to empower individuals and communities to uplift women, young people—especially girls—and the wider community to be leaders for positive change. We are an organisation made up of community development experts who recognise that to create a sustainable world, we must harness communities’ potential. We strongly believe that women and young people in Cameroonian communities are central assets whose full potential remains untapped. We are also cognizant that the majority of indigenous people in communities across Cameroon live under the poverty line and work with community - based organisations to meet their needs. CCID has been working in several areas to advance women’s rights and gender equality set by BPFA +25, namely sexual harassment, community development, SRHR advocacy and policy management. We have held campaigns called “Safe Schools for All” to promote an academic and community culture that effectively and strategically addresses and prevents sexual harassment in learning environments. We have fellowship programs to educate and train young leaders regarding gender issues, development and capacity building at the grass - root level so that there can be a bottom to top change, and last but not least, we devote time and energy toward developing policy and advocacy documents that provide readers with an understanding of key issues regarding human rights and community development in Cameroon especially in the context of women and girls. We also use these briefs to urge community leaders, local policymakers, government officials, and other authorities to reform policies, traditions, and norms that interfere with Cameroonians’ basic rights.

Contact Us

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