

FGM and Breast ironing

FGM is a form of child abuse and violence against women and girls. FGM comprises all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs, for non-medical reasons. It has no health benefits and harms girls and women in many ways. It involves removing and damaging healthy and normal female genital tissue, and hence, interferes with the natural function of girls' and women's bodies.

The practice causes severe pain and has several immediate and long-term health consequences, including difficulties in child birth also causing dangers to the child.

FGM prevalence in England and Wales:

- In 2015, approximately 60,000 girls aged 0-14 were born to mothers who had undergone FGM.
- Approximately 103,000 women aged 15-49 and approximately 24,000 women aged 50 and over who have migrated to England and Wales are living with the consequences of FGM.
- It is illegal to carry out FGM in the UK and the Female Genital Mutilation Act was brought into force in 2003. The law in England and Wales was strengthened in 2015 to provide for new measures, including FGM protection orders and a mandatory reporting duty.

All agencies are encouraged to work together so that there is a multi-agency approach to help those who have been affected by FGM, or those at risk. Agencies can include:

- Police, Social care, Family, Education, Church/religious organisations, Border Force / UKVI, Community, Healthcare, Voluntary services

FGM has significant physical, emotional, and psychological consequences and must not be excused, accepted or condoned. Health consequences can include:

- Low-self-esteem, painful intercourse, difficulty with child birth, depression, death, fracture or dislocation during constraint, menstrual obstruction, severe pain and shock, post-traumatic stress disorder, HIV infection, blood loss, infection, urinary and other infections, hepatitis.

What is breast ironing?

Breast Ironing is practiced in some African countries, notably Cameroon. Girls aged between 9 and 15 have hot pestles, stones or other implements rubbed on their developing breast to stop them growing further. In the vast majority of cases breast ironing is carried out by mothers or grandmothers and the men in the family are unaware. Estimates range between 25% and 50% of girls in Cameroon are affected by breast ironing, affecting up to 3.8 million women across Africa.

Why does breast ironing happen?

The practice of breast ironing is seen as a protection to girls by making them seem 'child-like' for longer and reduce the likelihood of pregnancy. Once girls' breasts have developed, they are at risk of sexual harassment, rape, and forced marriage and kidnapping; consequently, breast ironing is more prevalent in cities. Cameroon has one of the highest rates of literacy in Africa and ensuring that girls remain in education is seen as an important outcome of breast ironing.

Breast ironing is physical abuse

Breast ironing is a form of physical abuse that has been condemned by the United Nations and identified as Gender-based Violence. Although, countries where breast ironing is prevalent have ratified the African Charter on Human Rights to prevent harmful traditional practices, it is not against the law.

Breast ironing does not stop the breasts from growing, but development can be slowed down. Damage caused by the 'ironing' can leave women with malformed breasts, difficulty breastfeeding or producing milk, severe chest pains, infections and abscesses. In some cases, it may be related to the onset of breast cancer.

Breast Ironing in the UK

Concerns have been raised that breast ironing is also to be found amongst African communities in the UK, with as many as a 1,000 girls at risk.

Keeping Children Safe in Education (2019) mentions breast ironing from page 83, as part of the section on so-called 'Honour Based Violence'.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/835733/Keeping_children_safe_in_education_2019.pdf

If staff are worried about the risk of breast ironing or have concerns, please speak to JTM's Designated Safeguarding Lead as soon as possible.