

Explain Breast Ironing, why it is practiced and where, and should the practice be discouraged - is it harmful to women?

We live in the world where our forefathers came up with different cultural beliefs and inhumane practices as a way of conforming to cultural, ethical, and sexual norms. The word 'sexuality' is very broad and sensitive especially when it relates to cultural practices. The list of offenses against women especially in Africa grows long: genitals are mutilated; breasts flattened; bodies battered; hair cut off for rituals; and minds deprived of education. There is no compensation for hard labor that lasts from dawn to dusk in fields and backyards. Women are working the most, yet they are benefiting the least. The hands that rock the cradle that rules the world are described by many as a "necessary evil". And now the breast itself - a feminine symbol and the pride of womanhood - has become a target. Yet very few women who have been victims of breast ironing will acknowledge the fact. Many claim never to have heard about it. Breast ironing is a form of child abuse, gender inequality, and body image issue (low self esteem) which brings about physical and emotional tortures including health complications and as such should be discouraged.

Due to sexuality issues like teenage pregnancy, a lot of mothers have been so protective of their daughter's sexual affairs by coming up with different drastic practices like breast ironing which is done to suppress the growth of breast in their female children as soon as their breasts starts developing. These mothers believe that the outgrowth of breast in their female child would sexually attract males to them, thereby resulting in sexuality issues like rape, teenage pregnancies (unwanted pregnancies), and lack of education. My main concern is this: Why are only females subjected to such inhumane tortures as a result of a sexuality issue that involves both males and females? Why should they "carry the cross" for sexuality issues mostly caused by men? Breast ironing is a form of child abuse, gender inequality, and body image issue (low self esteem) which brings about physical and emotional tortures including health complications and as such should be discouraged.

According to <http://www.wluml.org/node/4129>, Breast Ironing is a traditional practice that involves massaging or pressing the breasts of pubescent girls in order to suppress and reverse their development. It is done with hot objects like: wooden pestle normally used for pounding tubers, coconut shells, grinding stones, ladles, spatulas, and hammers heated over coals/fire. The rationale is to prevent girls from developing breasts in the belief that a flat, child-like chest will discourage unwanted male attention, rape and pre-marital/teenage pregnancy. This practice may begin in children as young as 8 years old depending on when their breasts sprouts and may continue until two months to a year whenever the result is effective. It is done 1-2 times a day and it remains a secret between the mother and the daughter as she is made to believe that it is done for her own good-to protect her against teenage pregnancy, sexual harassment and rape. Some females, through early Breast Ironing education and visual examples done to their older siblings vulnerably would give them selves to their mothers when they notice breasts growth.

Breast Ironing is prevalent in West African countries like Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Togo, Benin and Cameroon. According to a report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), it is widely practiced in Cameroon which has a population of over 16 million people. Statistics also shows that 26% Cameroonians are victims and one in four is subjected to this practice according to a survey by the German development agency (June 2006). Breast ironing appears to be most widely-practiced in Cameroon. According to the United Nations Population Fund, the practice of breast ironing is more prevalent in the Christian and animist south of Cameroon, where 20-50% of pubescent girls are affected. In the North, roughly 10% of girls are affected. The practice is not only physically agonizing and detrimental to health; it has also proven to be futile in deterring teenage sexual activity.

The damage this mutilation causes would not be justified even if the supposed benefits of the practice were real. Fertilized by a culture of silence, breast ironing has persisted into this age of scientific advancement, ironically, because many women have seen the benefits of educating their female children. As such, mothers are prepared to do anything to avoid a teenage pregnancy and early marriage that would end their daughters' education. As I said earlier, this does not make any sense to me because the real culprit is ignorance or lack of effective sexual education and not these innocent girls. Like female genital mutilation, breast ironing violates women and young girls' fundamental right to enjoy good health, physical integrity and, of course, freedom from torture (child abuse). Yet even this violent approach has failed to stall an epidemic of premarital pregnancies, which have risen to approximately 30% of births, according to local health care workers. Also, I have never heard of males genitals mutilated or ironed as a result of sexuality issues which makes breast ironing one of the gender inequality issue. Females are exposed to body image related issues like low self esteem that may affect them in their career, education and public or social affairs due to missing of one (breast dissymmetry) or both breasts. Apart from these consequences, there are others like emigration, rape, pregnancy and health complications such as: breast cancer, cyst, abscesses, early discharge of milk, depression, suicidal attempts or acts, to mention but a few.

Perhaps things are different in Cameroon, but I can't imagine a psycho rapist in America being serious deterred by scars on a woman's breasts. If he cared about her appearance, he should be asking her for a date, not assaulting her. There are more to sexual attraction than just around the burst line – breasts. In today's world, men are looking at other marital qualities like education, good attitude, family background and other important things and not just physical attraction. How about rounding up the men who can't control themselves and cutting their penises off or have

it ironed? That would be more effective, I know men would argue that there are female rapists but this is very rare. Females don't stand out on the roads wearing masks to rape men; at least this should prove to mothers in Cameroon that they can sexually control themselves than women.

The bottom line is how to educate these women about their ignorance and have them stop this inhumane act because it will continue to affect our future daughters, which is really the sad part because after they have undergone the pains of breast ironing, these girls grow up into mothers that will do the same to their girls. This act should be fought against by everyone and not just Cameroonians and other countries involved because you never know who will get married to your children and what may happen behind closed doors. In response to the ills of breast ironing, the UNPF report makes mention of an organization, The Network of Aunties Association (RENATA). RENATA is an organization comprising breast ironing victims and their aim is to draw attention to the physical trauma and ensuing health risks of breast ironing. RENATA does this via spots on radio and TV as well as distributing of calendars and leaflets highlighting objects used in breast ironing, the extent of the practice and its consequences.

As the saying goes: "United we stand, divided we fall." I will suggest everyone be involved in the fight against breast ironing by creating awareness and education to those that know and those that don't know about this drastic act. Governments in affected countries should raise public awareness of the dangers of breast ironing and why it needs to be stopped. This awareness should also include frank discussions of sexuality and encouraging rape prevention programs and birth control education which may help to reduce the fears from these mothers. When all these is said and done, the world as a whole would be a better place to live in without fears of the unknown.

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