



**GENDER EMPOWERMENT  
AND DEVELOPMENT (GeED)**

## **BREAST IRONING...**



**A HARMFUL PRACTICE THAT  
HAS  
BEEN  
SILENCED FOR TOO LONG**

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## About GeED

### GENDER EMPOWERMENT & DEVELOPMENT

GeED is based in Cameroon with two regional offices in Bamenda, the North West Region and Yaoundé, the Center Region. GeED came into existence on August 1996 as (Global Education and Environment Development) and was eventually legalized as a service organization in 2001. During a general assembly in 2008, the organization was changed to Gender Empowerment and Development (GeED). GeED is dedicated to improving the lives of women and Youths especially through advocacy lobbying, education, training and economic empowerment.

Her **Vision** is to see the sustainable development of communities through the positive behavioral change and the communities' own self determination. **GeED's Mission** exists to facilitate self generated and sustaining processes of improved well-being of women and Youths through awareness creation, training, education and support. GeED is working to develop the capacities required for equitable and participatory development towards the attainment of the MDGs.

- ♣ Public understanding is expanded on issues of gender-based violence, its causes, consequences and costs to the development process in Cameroon, using CEDAW provisions and other international human rights instruments Organise a training of victims on how to claim their rights and support 35% victims of gender-based violence are counselled and referred to partner structures for trauma healing and rehabilitation
- ♣ Set up and strengthen mechanisms for redress on cases of Human Right abuses perpetrated on women Organise a training of victims on how to claim their rights
- ♣ Document women rights violations and discrimination and build a data bank on the types of violations suffered by women.

## GeED's Current & Recent Activities

GeED recently wrote a report published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on;

***"Beijing +15: The Reality of Cameroon and the Unfinished business; Assessing the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in Cameroon"***

Currently, GeED is undertaking a project known as;

***"Capacity building project on the elimination of discrimination against women in 3 regions of Cameroon (North, Center and South Region)"***

In GeED's project of identifying the different types of violence perpetrated on women in these regions. Amongst the **objectives** of this project are:

So far, GeED has covered the parts of these three regions and has found out that amongst violence against women harmful practices, Breast ironing is not very talked about as part of violence inflicted on young girls yet it is a traditional or emerging practice, prescribed by social norms, which are often embedded in culture. As female genital mutilation, early marriage and forced marriage are practices that often come before the Committees, are well studied and have been gradually reduced with certain legislative and programmatic approaches, and the most prominent and not talked about as a harmful traditional practice is breast ironing, a very common violation on young girls, practiced in almost all parts of Cameroon.

### **BREAST IRONING: .....A harmful practice that has been silenced for too long**

*"If society has been silent about it up to now is because, like other harmful practices done to women such as female genital mutilation, it was thought to be good for the girl...even the victims themselves thought it was good for them."*( Flavien Ndonko, Anthropologist and local representative of German Development Agency GTZ)

## Introduction

### Breast Ironing: An Emerging Type of Violence Against women in Cameroon

Violence against women (VAW) is a global problem affecting millions of women and girls of all cultures, religion, socio-economic strata, educational levels and other diversity. It is recognized as a human rights issue that manifests itself in physical psychological, sexual, social and cultural forms. Violence is the result of the complex interplay of individual, relational, social, cultural and environmental factors. Violence against women has serious consequences which are far reaching and includes the erosion of self-esteem, self-worth, physical, mental and psychological health etc. VAW is highly prevalent in particular within the family and remains widely socially tolerated. In Cameroon traditional harmful practices have existed for generations and the recognition of Female genital mutilation has set the pace for breast ironing.

The greatest challenge to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child which both contain legally binding obligations in relation to the elimination of harmful practices affecting girls under eighteen is the lack of a proper evaluation of the different cultures regarding women to see how well a comprehensive engagement can be carried out to end the different forms of violence against women and girls in the many cultures that exist and based on gender stereotypes and prejudices grounded in patriarchy. Amongst the socio cultural practices including female genital mutilation, forced marriage, widowhood rites, child labor etc. Another prevalent form of violence against girl children in Cameroon is breast ironing.

## Context

Situated on Africa's Guinean Gulf, Cameroon population as of January 01, 2010 stands at 19,406,100, representing 250 different ethnicities. Sharing borders with Togo, Benin, and Equatorial Guinea, the nation known as "Miniature Africa" has recently been receiving attention due to a harmful ritual imposed on the nation's pre-pubescent women: breast ironing.<sup>1</sup>

Breast ironing affects women in all 10 of Cameroon's provinces, crossing ethnic and religious boundaries. The practice is most prevalent in the Littoral province (53%), which houses Cameroon's largest city of Douala; numbers are generally higher in urban areas, where sexual advances are more common. Possibly due to the differences in attire, breast ironing is less common in the nation's north (7%), where the population is primarily Muslim.<sup>2</sup> However,

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<sup>1</sup> Breast Ironing in Cameroon: Just a Rumour?; Mancho Innocent Ndifor, Karolinska Institute

<sup>2</sup> BREAST IRONING IN CAMEROON; *Women in Africa Bear A Painful Tradition* by Roxy Varza, Assistant Editor <http://www.theworldly.org/ArticlesPages/Articles2006/September06Articles/Cameroon-Ironing.html>

regardless of location, religion, or ethnicity, the risk of undergoing breast ironing doubles amongst girls who show signs of puberty before the age of nine.

Unlike many other African nations, Cameroon enjoys general political stability, has a high-ranking educational system and one of the highest literacy rates in Africa (79% as of 2003). While teen pregnancy rates have declined since 1996, with 60% of all teens experiencing one or more pregnancies, to 20% in 2003, numbers are still high and have obviously not been reduced by the breast ironing. The rationale behind breast ironing, which is to protect young girls from sexual advances, conflicts with the reality that these girls can still become pregnant. The 5,661 women between the ages of 9 and 82, who were touched by breast ironing in 2005, sheds light upon a desperate need for sex education in a country where the topic is still very taboo.<sup>3</sup> Breast ironing is an age-old practice in Cameroon, as well as in many other countries in West and Central Africa, including Chad, Togo, Benin, Guinea – Conakry, just to name a few, “ said Flavien Ndonko, an Anthropologist and local representative of German Development Agency GTZ, which sponsored the survey.<sup>1</sup>

## What is breast ironing?

Breast ironing, known as a form of mutilation is another weird practiced whereby pubescent girls breasts are flatten. This involves pounding and massaging the developing breasts of young girls from about eight years with hot objects to try to make them disappear.<sup>4</sup>

## The trend of Breast Ironing

The practice was initially done by women with the thought of improving a mother’s breast milk. This thought has gradually changed and now inflicted upon 24% of Cameroonian women as young as the age of nine. While the practice is commonly performed by family members, 58% of the time by the mother, these young and naïve girls buy into its reasoning and often continue inflicting the practice upon their own bodies.

## Rational for breast ironing:

The practice performed usually by mothers chiefly in urban areas than villages is believed to be an efficient means

- ♣ in an attempt to protect the girl from sexual harassment and rape,
- ♣ to prevent early pregnancy that would tarnish the family name,
- ♣ or to allow the girl to pursue education rather than be forced into early marriage.

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<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

- ♣ delaying pregnancy; by “removing” signs of puberty,
- ♣ These girls are thought to no-longer appear sexually attractive to men.
- ♣ It helps prevent early marriage and some mothers are equally worried that their daughters’ budding breast would expose them to the risk of sexual harassment.

### **Objects used**

Breast ironing, a practice that involves pressing heated objects – The main objects used to practice breast ironing are Spatulas – Stones – coconut shells – Pestle – wooden spoon – hot seeds of black fruits

To effectively do this, it has been noted that the usage of these objects range: the hot wooden spoon/broom (24%), stones (20%), pestle (17 %), breast band (10 %), leaves (9 %), towel (5 %) and others (15 %). The group others comprised hot cook spoons, hot fufu, hot seeds of black fruits, hot plantain peelings, hot plumbs, bananas, ants, ice cubs, hot palm, nuts, salt and kerosene .

most commonly spatulas (24%) and stones (20%) – onto a girl’s developing breasts, is believed to be an efficient means of delaying pregnancy; by “removing” signs of puberty, these girls are thought to no-longer appear sexually attractive to men.

### **The perpetrators**

- Mother
- Aunt
- Grand mother,
- Sister
- Guardian
- Nanny

### **Statistics on its perpetrators**

A survey on a research study indicated that 58% of the ironing was done by mothers of the victims, 10% by a nanny, 9% by a sister and 7% by a grandmother. The risk of having the breast ironed was identified as depending on the age when breast first develop. For girls whose breast developed before the age of 9, there was a 50% chance of having the breasts ironed. The rate was 38% for girls whose breasts grew before 11, 24% for girls whose breasts grew before 12 years of aged and 14% for girls whose breasts grew before the age of 14 (2). The survey also found that 70% of the breasts were bandaged or attached with breast bands after the ironing while 30 % used undersized breast wears.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Public Health Sciences: Breast Ironing in Cameroon: Just a Rumour? Mancho Innocent Ndifor, Karolinska Institutet, Master theses in Public Health ;Board of Education in Public Health Sciences at Karolinska Institutet.

## Breast ironing as Family violence

According to violence research, “family violence” refers to many forms of abuse, mistreatment or neglect that children and adults may experience in their intimate kinship or dependent relationships<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, breast ironing may be considered a type of **family violence** since the practice is imposed to the young girls without their consent. Furthermore, breast ironing should also be perceived as a type of **female to female violence** which is rarely mentioned in the African context. This is due to the overwhelming burden caused by the well know “Gender Based Violence” which is based on power relations between man and women and has become an important factor in the current feminization of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>7</sup>.

## The irony of breast ironing practice

Young people make up most of the 5.5 Percent of the population living with HIV, and teenage pregnancy is a growing concern. One-third of the 20 to 30 percent of girls with Unwanted pregnancies are between 13 and 25 years of age, with more

In GeED’s current project to identify the various forms of violence women face, breast ironing was prominent. What was ironical was the fact that mothers were proud to be the perpetrators of such act as they termed it “protection”. Also, many of these women could freely explain the process because to them, it is not a harmful practice.

than half of them having fallen pregnant after their first sexual encounter, according to GTZ<sup>8</sup>. Research has shown that mothers were the main perpetrators of the practice of breast ironing. Ironically, Cameroonian men have only recently become aware of this practice through the growth of campaigns against it. Organizations such as the National Network of the Association of Aunties (Réseau National des Associations de Tantines, RENATA), the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Family, and the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, GTZ) are leading the campaign to educate mothers and daughters about the dangers involved, and the better ways to prevent teen pregnancy. GeED has joined hands in this fight against breast ironing and in its ongoing project on identifying the different types of violence women undergo. GeED will definitely have a follow up on this as its priority to document this, sensitize raise awareness and put up measures that could help eradicate this harmful practice.

<sup>6</sup> Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile. Ottawa: CCJS 1999; pp1-30. and Ghatte D. family violence and violence against children. Children and Society 2000;14:395-403

<sup>7</sup> Awuba JA. HIV/AIDS in Cameroon. Does gender matter in Policy making?.Stockholm: Karolinska Institutet (Master thesis in Health Promotion), 2006; pp 1-10. Martin SL, Curtis S. Gender based violence and HIV/AIDS: recognizing links and acting on evidence, Lancet 2004;362:1410-1411

<sup>8</sup> **CAMEROON: Campaign launched to counter 'breast ironing'**; YAOUNDE, 28 June 2006 (PlusNews); <http://www.plusnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=39711>;; accessed 24/08/2011

## Effects of breast ironing

- ♣ While there is little research on the health effects of the practice, it is considered that the practice can cause tissue damage in addition to the pain of the ironing process. The U.S. State Department, in its 2010 human rights report on Cameroon, cited news reports and said breast ironing "victimized numerous girls in the country" and in some cases "resulted in burns, deformities, and psychological problems." There are more than 200 ethnic groups in Cameroon with different norms and customs. Breast ironing is practiced by all of them.<sup>9</sup> According to the GTZ/RENATA survey a plethora of illnesses was reported to be associated with breast ironing. Among them were severe:
  - ♣ pains, high fever; abscess in the breast; breast pimples on and around the breast nipples; cysts in the breasts; itching of breasts, severe chest pain; flow of breasts, milk infection of breasts as a result of scarification; one breast being bigger than the other; breasts never grow bigger and complete disappearance of the breasts.<sup>10</sup> Other possible side effects include:
  - ♣ breast infections; malformed breast and the possible complete eradication of one or two breasts. In addition ten cases of diagnosed breast cancer were identified in women who underwent breast ironing.

## Current National Policies on Breast Ironing

The government of Cameroon has over the years ratified various international instruments and conventions that recognize the rights of women as well as fundamental human rights that serve as a framework for developing a policy for the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against women. Even the constitution of the country is explicit on the need of human rights for the entire population. In addition in

- **December 1986** Cameroon acceded to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.
- **In 1994**, the country also ratified the convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women;
- July 2003, Cameroon also ratified the protocol to the African Charter on Human Rights and rights of women in Africa. That protocol included the right to life and physical integrity and protection against harmful traditional practices (6)

However, no law has been passed or enforced at the National level regarding breast ironing or any other "traditional harmful practice"

## Recommendations

Results showed that the practice is widespread across all provinces with high prevalence in the Littoral Province. In addition the study found that mothers were the main perpetrators of

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<sup>9</sup> [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-07-27/world/cameroon.breast.ironing\\_1\\_breast-cameroonian-mothers?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-07-27/world/cameroon.breast.ironing_1_breast-cameroonian-mothers?_s=PM:WORLD)

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF. Violence against children in the home and family. Unicef,

breast ironing. Furthermore, results found that currently the country does not have any policy which is aimed to eradicate the practice of breast ironing.

- legislation aimed at illegalizing breast ironing is needed as well as enforcement of any approved law. Furthermore, the Cameroon government should in cooperation with all women organizations intensify efforts on health education on the consequences of the practice of breast ironing to the whole population.
- Health care personnel and other social entities such as social services and the police as well as community leaders should be empowered to denounce the perpetrators of breast ironing.
- Furthermore it creates difficulties in a sense that health care services as well as social services such as police and social welfare services will not report potential victims or perpetrators of breast ironing. Therefore, massive education on the health consequences of breast ironing should become a priority and an inter-sectorial cooperation is an essential component.
- CSOs have a very great role to play, so they should lobby the government into enforcing and putting in place policies that will help eradicate this harmful practice.

## **Conclusion**

During some of GeED's project activities, most women have expressed their satisfaction of (ignorantly) inflicting this pain on their girl child which they believe is in their interest.

Despite the problems with breast ironing, it has not yet been banned by authorities. While victims do have protection under law, very few cases are taken to court. If it is concluded that damage has been done to the victim, the responsible party can face up to 3 years in prison. Victims, however, are often too young and very unlikely to report their family member. The absence of a government enforced law may benefit the generational practice of breast ironing which is a health consequence for the girls and women who experience it. However above all the Cameroon Government must have a political will to promote and enforce eventual laws for the ban of breast ironing or otherwise million of Cameroonian girls will continue endure physical and psychological trauma.

As follow up of GeED's ongoing project, GeED intends to investigate the cultural context in which this practice, the physical and psychological health effects, provide a guide to appropriate interventions

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