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The Harmful Traditional Practice of Breast Ironing in Cameroon, Africa.

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Cameroon lies on the west coast of Central Africa, with Nigeria to its north and Equatorial Guinea to its south. It is often referred to as Miniature Africa for its diverse cultural, social, and geographical layout which include around 250 ethnic groups divided between 10 separate provinces (Awuba & Macassa, 2007). The country is also praised for its political stability as well as its education system and it having one of the highest literacy rates in Africa, with 79% in 2003 (Ngunshi, 2011). But behind the façade lies a deep secret of female body mutilation affecting young girls known as breast ironing. The term breast ironing is defined by the UN Women - United Nations entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women as “the painful practice of massaging or pounding young girls’ breasts with heated objects to suppress or reverse the growth of the breasts” (United Nations Women. n.d). This process involves the use of pestles, grinding stones, spatulas, pits of black fruit, coconut shells, and other common household items which are heated over a wooden fire to a bearable heat then pressed and massaged around the young girl’s breast in belief that it will melt the breast fat, causing the growth to cease (Bidan, 2015). There is also another form of breast ironing which does not involve heat but instead uses a constrictive band which is worn around the young girl’s chest, flattening the breasts and restricting them from growth. The practice of breast ironing and flattening affects around one-quarter of the female population in Cameroon, with 24% of young girls having experienced the traumatic process (Reproductive Health Matters, 2006). What makes this phenomenon interesting is that despite cultural, religious, or geographical differences seen across the country, breast ironing does not seem to confine to just one region, but rather, is found in all sectors of Cameroon with the same harmful effects on young women’s health.

Firstly, it is important to define the demographic which breast ironing is affecting. The practice typically takes place between the mother or aunt of the family who flattens their daughter or niece’s breast when the child reaches puberty. Typically, women start developing breasts between the ages of 9-15 so consequentially breast ironing will begin at this young age. This has become problematic due to the age of puberty occurring at younger ages in females in the past decade, with studies showing that women of African descent have a higher rate of young breast development, with some experiencing breast growth by the age of 7 (Pharmacy Times, 2010). It is also more likely for young girls to undergo the tradition if they begin developing breasts younger, with statistics stating that girls who experienced puberty before age 9 were 50% more likely to have their breasts ironed (Ngunshi, 2011). The flattening of the breast is believed to help prevent young women from unwanted attention or rape, as well as to delay sexual activity which could lead to early pregnancy. Breasts are considered a sign of sexual readiness in many cultures so if the breasts are removed, it is believed that women will receive less sexual attention (Tchoukou, 2014). The practice has been growing, it seems, due to Cameroon having high teen pregnancy rate with statistics from 2003 showing that 20% of girls under the age of 18 have become pregnant (Ngunshi, 2011). Young pregnancy leads to further problems which can include including premature birth, low birth weight, and possibility of passing on a sexually transmitted disease such as chlamydia or HIV to the child but it also increases the likelihood that the pregnant girl will drop out of school in order to take care of the child (WebMD, n.d). In response to this epidemic, mothers will flatten their daughter’s breasts to ensure their daughters continue their education and to try and protect their daughters from sexual advances.

Although this paper highlights the issue of breast ironing in Cameroon it is also present in other countries including Togo, South Africa, Nigeria, Chad, Benin, and there have been around 1000 reported cases in the United Kingdom (Tchoukou, 2014). This means that this is a widespread problem which affects both the West and non-Western areas by violating human rights through

serious health issues. Although no national medical studies have been conducted in Cameroon on breast ironing for either long nor short term effects, the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ) and the U.S. State Department concluded that breast ironing could lead to serious physical harm. In both the survey used by GTZ and the 2010 human rights report on Cameroon presented by the State Department, it was determined that the effects on the breasts including abscesses, cysts, itching, permanent damage to milk ducts, infection, severe fever, severe pain, burns, deformation of breasts or the complete disappearance of one or both breasts (Tchoukou, 2014). On top of all these issues that can arise, there have been “ten cases of diagnosed breast cancer in women who underwent breast ironing” (Tchoukou, 2014). Dr. Sinou Tchana, a gynecologist, has also seen cases of both first and second degree burns on the breast which can lead to further infection due to the damage that has occurred on the skin’s protective layer (Tchoukou, 2014). These are just the physical harms that come from the practice, often girls also experience psychological traumas including feels of low self-esteem, and feelings of lost femininity (Bidan, 2015; Tchoukou, 2014). The practice can also have the negative effect of making girls believe they should not have breasts which is problematic for a woman’s mental state if she were to develop breasts later in life (Tchoukou, 2014). A young woman named Gaelle, who is now 26, spoke about her experience of breast ironing as a girl stating:

"At night, my mother would make me wear a really tight elastic band around my chest. During the day, she'd massage me with a spatula, a pestle, a stick or a rock. It really hurt. I asked her to stop and eventually she did. But after the ironing, my breasts grew really fast. Like really, really fast. I was so ashamed. I wanted to hide them. People on the street would scream at me about my boobs. By my twenties, my breasts started to sag like those of a 50-year-old woman. I'm reluctant to undress in front of people. Sometimes, I keep my top on when I have sex with my boyfriend. I really resent my mother" (Bidan, 2015).

This woman, like many others, has felt the harsh realities of breast ironing. It destroys more than a girl’s breasts but also her confidence. There is also the story of Emmanuelle, a 23-year-old, who spoke about her mother ironing her breasts and the pain that came with the massaging, describing it “as if she was stabbing something into my chest” (Bidan, 2015). She goes on to say that her cousin raped and impregnated her when she was only 13 years old and because of the ironing she no longer had breasts to produce milk to feed her child (Bidan, 2015). Both these women describe examples of harms which have had long term negative effects on them that are a result of breast ironing but also highlight that this method is not an effective method against rape or pregnancy.

The underlying issue is not just the lack of legislation in the country that should protect women but the lack of direct language referring to breast ironing in legislation in Cameroon. The country has ratified many international conventions which include the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in 1986, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1993, (CEDAW) in 1994, and the protocol of the African Charter of Human Rights and People’s Rights in 2003, which includes “the right to life and physical integrity and protection against harmful traditional practices” (Ngunshi, 2001; UNESCO, n.d). These conventions, in theory, should protect women against breast ironing but often fail to due to politics being mostly male-dominated (Teeple, 2004). The issue of breast ironing violates all the prior listed documents in different ways, for example under article 24(3) of the CRC there is an obligation to rid States of traditional practices that are harmful to a child’s health (Tobin, 2009). Under CEDAW, States are obligated “to ensure elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations or enterprises” (CEDAW, 2009). Also by using the definition of torture defined by

the Convention Against Torture, which is stated as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person... punishing him for an act or a third person has committed...” (Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1987) the practice of breast ironing violates it due to girls being punished for men sexualizing them due to their breasts. The issue of legality also arises when discussing a young girl’s choice to breast ironing for she is still considered a child and most legislation uses terms such as “persons” which is only defined as “someone over the age of majority...” and in this sense children are not persons (Teepie, 2004). This practice harms many young girls who seem to lack protection from the law when it comes to breast ironing due to it not being directly addressed in legislation. Furthermore, there seems to be a lack of sexual education throughout the country which has left room for abuses such as breast ironing to substitute as a solution to adolescent pregnancy and sexual abuse.

In response to this, some non-government organizations have come forward to press the Cameroon government to adjust laws around breast ironing as well as to educate about sexual health rather than keeping it a taboo matter, leaving girls and boys without the proper knowledge to prevent pregnancy and the transmission of disease (Fernandez Ortize, 2011). There are organizations which moving towards change on both a local and international level, a process that is critical according to author Jay Drydyk who notes that there “must be ‘substantive participation’ at the local, national, and international levels so that voices can participate freely...” in order to create change (Churchill, 2006, 95). One of the young activist groups at the grass-root level include RENTA which consists of young women in Cameroon who are educated on reproductive matters and trained to teach others through neighbourhood and schools about sexual education (Fernandez Ortize, 2011; Reproductive Health Matters, 2006). Through their education to others, these “tentines” (aunts) are able to address the use of breast ironing as a protective measure and the physical and psychological problems that can come and where to receive help, in the hopes that it will put an end to the body mutilation (Reproductive Health Matters, 2006). Many of these tentines have experiences breast ironing first hand and have had to face problems themselves so by educating others it opens the door for discussion as well as letting women know that there are other forms of protection against pregnancy. To further their reach RENTA, with the help of other local businesses, have set up campaigns to educate a broader group of people which included broadcasts over the radio and the use of a calendar campaign which highlighted the harms, the tools, and the future consequences of the practice (Ngunshi, 2011). Through a wider spectrum, the group can reach out to the family members who are performing the practice and educate them further on the harms and why it is not healthy for the daughters. This step forward has been successful from the grass-root level but combined efforts from the NGO Gender Empowerment and Development (GeED) there has been more global attention on the practice. In 2011, GeED released a report on the harms that come from breast ironing and began to put pressure on the government to make change by providing recommendations on how to combat the practice (UN Women, n.d). By bringing in pressure from the top down and the bottom up the government is more likely to create change around an issue for it is important to many for serious matters.

It seems though that when international forces step in, questions are raised about whether they are needed and whether Western ideas are being pushed onto another culture due to their Eurocentric nature. But in response it is important to consider that only certain concepts are Eurocentric and that when the rights are properly understood, human rights are justifiable from within all cultures” (Drydyk, 1997) Also, international conventions, such as that of the CRC, were designed to not rid States of their culture and the practices that go along with it but rather to

eliminate practices that would cause harm to children (Tobin, 2009). Author John Tobin, in his article “the international obligation to abolish traditional practices harmful to children’s health: What does it mean and require of states?” uses article 24(3) in the CRC to state that “any tradition which has a negative impact on the health of a child, whether mental or physical, temporary or permanent, must be abolished” (378, 2009). Of course, there have been times when Westerns have tried to intervene with separate ideologies and it has had backlash, for example, the attempted intervention in Somalia over FGM. This failed because the country in question was in a state of chaos and therefore FGM was not a top priority (Deegan, 1994). But there have also been success stories from Westerner intervention and Cameroon is in an optimal state for transformation due to its political stability and high literacy rate.

For more concrete change to protect girls from breast ironing more legislation will need to be instated. Breast ironing is technically included under the conventions which were stated earlier but lacks the solid language to make it an illegal act, so creating legislation that is specific to the traditional practice it is ensured that this “will be seen as instances of human rights violations, no less serious than comparable violations that are most typically encountered by men” (Drydyk, 1997). This legislation should also include accessible and understandable sexual education to not only young boys and girls but also to mothers and other influential peoples. This will help create change by having mothers understand the risks, there is a better possibility of stopping the practice and if it does not stop at this generation there is hope to have it stopped by the next. By educating the public and children on ways of preventing early pregnancy, the adolescent pregnancy rate should decrease, which would help protect girls from the tradition. As for mothers or aunts who are committing the act, there should be charges held against them but legislation should also hold accountable men that make unwanted sexual advances against these women. Finally, this legislation should also include a safe space for women to go that have experienced trauma, both mentally and physically, to talk about it and get counseling if needed. There are some measures under legislation that can be used from both grass-root institutions as well as international NGOs. For example, sexual education has already come a long way from grass-root group but more education groups could be beneficially in spreading the word further. Or the use of counseling, this is a place where grass-root groups can easily step in and take a leadership role in helping the community heal. That being said, there are also things like pushing for accountability that can only be done by having pressure from international NGOs as well as local NGOs.

In conclusion, breast ironing has caused more harm than good to women. It does not help prevent unwanted attention, rape, or young pregnancy and sets a woman up for a lifetime of difficulties including pain, inability for breastfeeding, and psychological trauma. There has been some organization that have aimed to bring attention and education to the matter but their presence is not enough without legislation further pushing for the elimination of this harmful traditional practice of breast ironing.

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