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Drivers of Breast Ironing Practices and Their Implications for Sexual Reproductive Health Rights Among Adolescents in Eastern Province Zambia: A Qualitative Study

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Background

Breast ironing, a form of traditional body modification involving the massaging or pressing of developing breasts, is intended to delay the onset of perceived sexual maturity and deter early sexual activity. It affects an estimated 3.8 million girls globally, particularly in the West and Central Africa, including Cameroon, Ghana, and Nigeria. Similarly, Although underreported, similar practices are emerging in Zambia, driven by patriarchal norms, fear of early pregnancy, and social pressures. Although underreported, similar practices are emerging in Zambia, driven by patriarchal norms, fear of early pregnancy, and social pressures. Therefore, this study sought to explore drivers of breast ironing practices and their implications for sexual reproductive health rights among adolescents in the Eastern province of Zambia to inform strategies that would protect girls' sexual and reproductive health rights.

Methods

This was a qualitative exploratory study where we conducted five in-depth interviews with key informants and two focus group discussions involving adolescents (aged 9–15 years) and community women. Participants were purposively selected from two peri-urban communities in the Eastern province of Zambia. Data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software

Results

We identified five key themes which are; (1) understanding breast ironing, (2) impact of breast ironing, (3) socio-cultural context,(4) addressing breast ironing, and (5)violation of sexual and reproductive health rights. The breast ironing practices among adolescents had biological, psychological and social effects including non-consensual experiences, physical pain, disrupted physiological development, psychological trauma, stigma, and violation of bodily autonomy. Although declining, breast ironing remains practiced, primarily by older female relatives and shrouded in secrecy Girls subjected to breast ironing reported non-consensual experiences, physical pain, disrupted physiological development, psychological trauma, stigma, and violation of bodily autonomy. The practice is culturally framed as protective but perpetuates gender-based violence and undermines adolescents' rights.

Conclusion

The study revealed that the drivers of breast ironing include fear of early sexual activity and pregnancy, desire to safeguard girls' education, cultural norms stigmatizing early breast development, fear of sexual violence, and patriarchal control of female sexuality. The practice has profound effects on adolescent well-being, yet there are no structured interventions addressing it. Therefore, we suggest that government through ministry of health and other stakeholders should develop strategies to educate and protect the public in order to achieve universal health for adolescent and young people. The study calls for urgent, culturally sensitive interventions such as community engagement, awareness campaigns, and policy advocacy led by the Ministry of Health and relevant stakeholders. Strengthening sexual and reproductive health education is essential to dispel myths surrounding puberty and promote the rights and well-being of young girls in Zambia.

Keywords: Breast ironing, adolescents, sexual and reproductive health rights, cultural practices, Chipata District, Zambia, gender-based violence.

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