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Structure de rassemblement des jeunes pour la défense des droits des enfants et pour un développement harmonieux et durable des jeunes des milieux défavorisés.

Theme: «Breast Ironing in Cameroon: an overview for Fair Fund »

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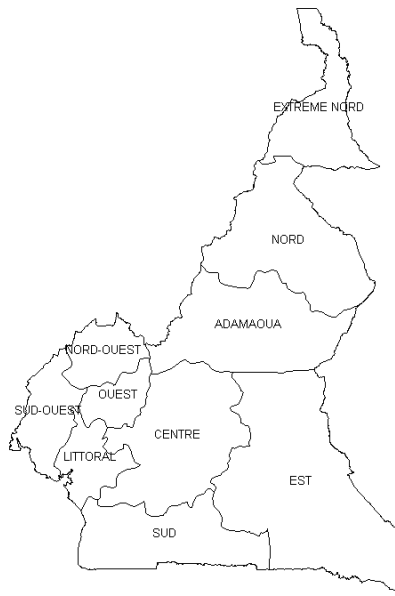
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General overview of Cameroon



Cameroon is a country located in the West part of Africa, bordering the bight of Biafra, between Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria. The country has a total superficies of 475,440 sq km and is border by Central African Republic 797 km, Chad 1,094 km, Republic of the Congo 523 km, Equatorial Guinea 189 km, Gabon 298 km, Nigeria 1,690 km.

The country is divided in ten provinces as shown on the map:

- Adamaoua, Nord (North), Extreme Nord (Far North), these provinces are also known as Muslim provinces or the Big North. It's the savannah or dry part of the country
- The rest of the country is known as the Christian part, and is characterise by a high pluviometry. It's the forest part of the country

The total population is 17 000 000, with life expectancy of 50.89, the fertility rate is 4.47 children born/woman.

The main diseases here are malaria (the country is endemic), Yellow fever (vaccination if obligatory if you want to enter the country) AIDS (5% prevalence in 2006)

The country is bilingual, we speak both English and French, but we have two purely English-speaking provinces, the North-west and the South-West.

What is Breast Ironing?

Breast ironing is a traditional practice that involves massaging or pressing the breasts of adolescent girls in order to suppress and reverse their development. The rationale is to prevent girls from developing breasts between 11 and 15 years old in the belief that a flat childlike chest will discourage unwanted male attention, rape and premarital pregnancy.

Breast ironing is a well-kept secret between the young girl and her mother. Often the father remains completely unaware. The girl believes that what her mother is doing is for her own good and she keeps silent. This silence perpetuates the phenomenon and all of its consequences. Breast 'ironing' involves massaging the growing breasts of young girls in order to disappear their breasts, usually by using a stone, a hammer or a spatula that has been heated over coals.

Proponents say they do this to discourage boy's interference toward the young girls, to prevent girls themselves from pursuing men, to discourage some girls to take part in the sexual intercourse to a very young age and to reduce the risk of pregnancy. Because sex's topic is taboo for young girls, those girls remain ignorant of how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy.

The young people constitute 5.5% of people living with the VIH AIDS in Cameroon, and the pregnancy of the teenagers is of a troubling growth; therefore the idea of the ironing of the breasts to delay the girl's sexual activity.

Proponents also argue that discouraging boy's attention will ensure that the girl's studies will not be interrupted.

What is used?

The widely used instrument to flatten the breasts as tighten – breasts is a piece of rubber (44%), wooden pestle, used for pounding tubers. Heated bananas, calabash, and stone to rush are also used.

Stone to rush



Wooden pestle

Some material used for breast ironing

Prevalence

A pilot study by Renata suggests that

- Breast ironing appears to be most widely practiced in Cameroon. It's more common in the Christian and animist south (30-50%) of the country than the Muslim north, where only 10 per cent of women are affected.
- It also occurs in Guinea-Bissau, West and Central Africa, including Chad, Togo, Benin, Guinea-Conakry.
- Some 24 per cent of girls in Cameroon, about one girl in four, undergo breast ironing.
- Breast ironing occurs extensively in the 10 provinces throughout Cameroon.
- A sample survey published in January 2006 of 5000 girls and women aged between 10 and 82 in Cameroon, estimates that 4 million women had suffered the process.
- Today, 3.8 million teenagers are threatened with the practice.
- Up to 53 per cent of women and girls interviewed in the coastal Littoral province, admit to having had their breasts 'ironed'.
- More than half (58 per cent) of cases breast ironing were undertaken by mothers. Other relatives also participate.

It is important to highlight that these informations are based on a pilot study, it might be important to carry out a more large and multicenters studies in order to determine the real prevalence of this by region and to find it's socio economics and cultural determinants, to well document health and psychological issues.

Health and Socio-Economic Implications

- Breast ironing is terribly painful and violates a young girl's physical integrity.
- Breast ironing exposes girls to numerous health problems such as abscesses, itching, discharge of milk, infection, dissymmetry of the breasts, cysts, breast infections, severe fever, tissue damage and even the complete disappearance of one or both breasts.
- This painful form of mutilation could not only have negative health consequences for the girls, but often proves futile when it comes to deterring teenage sexual activity.

What can we say?

First of all we can observe that this practice is more cultural than traditional, since it's common in urban than rural zone, and we can found it in all parts and cultural groups it's

important to study its influence and determinants in each cultural, ethnic, religious, and socio economic group.

The prevalence is high in two provinces: the Littoral (53%) and West (31%)

If this practice is current in the south part of the country where the precocious marriage is discouraged, in the north or Moslem part where the precocious marriage is encouraged, in addition to the ironing of the breasts made by the moms so that the father doesn't send their daughter quickly in marriage, another practice is current in this part of the country; they use the scarifications and of the herbs to enlarge chest of girls at the time of the departure in precocious marriage.

Breast ironing as Child marriage is a harmful traditional practice and violates many basic human rights of children. It is a form of domestic violence too.

According to Pr Doh Anderson, "There are structures in the breast made of connective tissue. Now if you over iron the breast, if you use very hot objects, if you pound on the breast at this tender age when the structures are developing of course you could also cause damage"; specialists also suspect that ironing can cause breast cancer. We suggest designing studies with medical doctors, physiopathologists, radiologist, and psychologists to study the structure of ironing breast and well describe its effect; this can be very helpful to link the damages to particular diseases and malformations. This information can be very helpful for sensitization campaigns and lobbying.

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