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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

## “BREAST IRONED” BY NAKINTI NOFURU

*CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.*



I am speaking out because I can. The time has come, at long last. And as I make my voice clear and loud and accessible for anyone who cares to listen, one should really hear the whispering of women in my country finally finding their voices. **Young girls humming songs which lyrics describe how, for the first time in our History, we are refusing to be mutilated in an attempt to escape rape. Where I come from, women still iron the breasts of their daughters to delay sexual development and unwanted attention from sexual predators.**

I am from Bamenda, an agricultural town in Northwest Cameroon known for its scenic location and cool climate. This is where I work and study. I have dedicated my career and curriculum to gender issues because my dream is more than ambitious. I want to help eliminate discrimination against women in Africa.

According to statistics from the United Nations Population Fund, one out of every four girls in Cameroon is a victim of breast ironing, equating to nearly 4 million young women. Breast ironing is primarily practiced in the Christian and Animist communities in the south of Cameroon, and less frequently in the Muslim north, where only 10 percent of women are affected. It is also practiced in Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Togo, Benin, and Guinea among African countries. The practice—which involves ironing the breasts of young girls using heated objects like coconut shells, hammers, or grinding stones—is rampant in my community. For centuries, the impunity was such when it came to sexual harassment and rape that women tried to make their body as inconspicuous as possible: by ironing themselves away from puberty. Needless to say, the practice has scarred and damaged young girls for life and for generations.

In 2007, the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) became one of the first agencies in the West to report on the practice. Dr. Flavien Ndonko head of the program and an anthropologist by training, listed many dangerous consequences for ironed breasts: high fever, breast cancer, severe chest pain, infection as a result of scarification, cysts, breast deformities and complete disappearance of the breasts.

“Saying that breasts are destroyed is an understatement,” Dr. Ndonko said in previously published reports. “Adolescents are traumatized, mutilated. This is a serious damage not only on their physical integrity, but also on their psychological well-being.”

Yet, the changes occurring now are extraordinary as the silence around this harmful tradition has been broken at last.

How many generations of women have suffered this abuse in the dark? Why did it take so long to bring this issue to light? But now women and girls are beginning to talk about their experiences in churches, women's groups, and even primary schools. The sigh of relief though nascent must come from so deep it is unfathomable.

I have watched as women wept at their ignorance. They never had imagined that by wanting to protect their daughters, they were in fact putting them at great risk.

Some women tell us that their daughters' breasts never grew back after being ironed; others had children whose bodies had the opposite reaction, with breasts growing larger than expected. Others had daughters whose breasts grew unevenly, or whose breasts shrunk and withered.

At a Presbyterian church in Musang Bamenda, I cried as women told me the different methods they used to iron their daughters' breasts: grinding stones heated over fire, hot bananas, broken clay pots, heated machetes.

Recently I stopped at a school in Bamenda. More than 90% of the pupils revealed that they knew about the practice.

One of the pupils explained how her breasts were ironed using a grinding stone. Many others said they witnessed it being done either to their sisters or to other girls in their community. On my way home from this primary school, I stopped to talk to a random woman on the street. She told me her name was Geneva. I asked if she had had her breasts ironed or if she had ironed the breasts of another. She laughed and told me she was both a perpetrator and a victim. I asked how many daughters she had and how many of them she had ironed, and she told me she had no daughters. I was confused.

"Madam, how are you a victim and a perpetrator then?" I asked.

"I ironed my own breasts when I was in primary school," she said.

"Behold, our breasts disappeared," she told me.

By mutilating the breast, first symbol of femininity, mothers themselves are imparting on their daughters the idea that the natural development of their body is a shame and a risk.

How can anyone expect women to grow from this?

