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Breast Ironing in Cameroon

A harmful practice restricting sexuality or a means to protect the girl child from harm

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Abstract

Around the world there exists so called harmful practices, they include e.g. female genital mutilation, child marriages and the little researched practice of breast ironing. This thesis presents lived experiences on the practice of breast ironing as experienced by women in Cameroon. It does so through three research questions: What notions of femininity are invoked in the performances of breast ironing? In particular, what notions of desired female sexuality are invoked in the performances of breast ironing? To what extent are notions of female sexuality portrayed as something which has to be controlled or evoked? What other notions of femininity are evoked in the practices of breast ironing?

The theoretical framework departs in feminist theory and builds upon gender performativity and lived experiences. Breast ironing is within this thesis understood as a performative practice. The core method for collecting empirical data has been in-depth semi-structured interviews in combination with participant observation. The interviews and observations were carried out in both the capital Yaounde and in Ndumbi and Djiang, which are two villages in the Eastern part of Cameroon.

The thesis presents the diversity in lived experiences of breast ironing and concludes that it is a practice with many meanings. It cannot simply be labelled a harmful practice, it needs also be understood as a means to protect the girl child from harm. Thus, breast ironing is a practice that seeks to protect the girl by aiming to decrease significations of femininity that breasts invokes. This in turn means that breast ironing is a practice that ultimately seeks to decrease the level at which the girl child is identified with femininity.

Keywords: breast ironing, feminism, performativity, lived experiences, harmful practices, femininity

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Abbreviations

CAMNAFAW	Cameroonian National Association for Family Welfare
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Violence Against Women
FGC	Female Genital Cutting
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
MINPROFF	Ministry for the Promotion of Woman and Family
N.M.W.P.	Network for More Women in Politics
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
RENATA	Réseau Nationale des Associations des Tantines
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VAW	Violence Against Women
WAA Cameroon	Women in Alternative Action, Cameroon

PART I – INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

1. Introduction

In all societies around the world there exist practices that are based in culturally and/or socially entrenched expectations of bodies and behaviour of women and men respectively (Kouyaté, 2009). They can in many instances be defined as gendering. That is, defining, emphasising or defining what a female and a male body are, and reinforcing what traits are acceptable for the individuals inhabiting these bodies both physically and mentally.

The practices referred to here are often defined as ‘cultural/traditional harmful practices’. The UNFPA defines this as “practices that undermine the well-being of women” (UNFPA, *no year*). Thus, reflecting the idea that such practices have negative effects on the individuals experiencing it. Another idea around such practices is that they often seek to restrict or control women and girl’s sexuality. Practices that fall under this definition are, among others: female genital cutting (FGC)¹, early and forced marriage, and son preference (OHCHR, 2003). Breast ironing² is another practice that, by the United Nations (UN), is defined as a harmful traditional or cultural practice.

In contemporary Cameroon, it is estimated that one in four girls experience breast ironing – the practice of massaging or pounding the breasts of young girls with heated or cold objects with the aim of suppressing or reversing the growth of the breast (Ndonko and Ngo’o, 2006). The general understanding of the practice is that it serves to hinder or delay the development of the breasts of young girls when they first begin to develop. Thus, breast ironing is generally carried out when the girl shows the first physical signs of entering puberty (Ndonko and Ngo’o, 2006:12).

This practice was first covered in 2006 through a larger survey (Ndonko and Ngo’o, 2006), which focuses on quantitative aspects and does not attempt to provide an interpretive analysis of the motivations and experiences of those involved. Instead existing research leans towards explaining

¹ This concept refers to different practices that all concern the modulation of the female sex. There are three common denominations that are used: female genital cutting, female genital mutilation, and female circumcision. The choice of terminology has effect on how one understands the practice. Simply put female circumcision equates the practices with male circumcision and leaves only a small room for questioning of the practice; female genital cutting tries to describe what the practice entails, however there is room for questioning of this conceptualisation as it can be seen as decreasing the ‘harshness’ of some of the procedures; female genital mutilation can be interpreted as entailing a universalising part of a colonial discourse and practice as it is part of the Western interventionist discourse. It has become a global political issue with international (Western) intervention in national politics and social development, particularly via human rights and democratisation processes (Malmström, 2009).

² This conceptualisation is used as this was the most common term in the field as well as in the little previous research. However, also the concept breast flattening occurred, as this would arguably better portray the aim and the act of the practice (Topscott, 2012). The choice was however made to use the definition as found in conversations with interviewees in Cameroon.

the practice as chiefly resulting from a "lack of knowledge and sexual education", (Hajdukowicz, 2011) in combination with a taboo surrounding sexuality (*ibid*; see also Ndonko and Ngo'o, 2006).

Previous research indicates that it is most common in the Central African country of Cameroon, although references are also found for neighbouring countries. It is estimated that one in four girls experience breast ironing in Cameroon (Ndonko and Ngo'o, 2006; Ndifor, 2007; Topscott, 2012). This indicates, despite the statistics being dated, that it is a common practice. This furthermore means that breast ironing is part of the lives of numerous individuals both those who have direct experiences but also those who live around it. Such a practice can therefore not be viewed as an isolated homogenous phenomenon, but should instead be approached and understood as highly integral in the everyday life in the societies where it is practiced. Thus, even though breast ironing is the focal point for this study it will be approached not as isolated, but as potentially being but one part in a lifelong process of creation and maintenance of the female gender role or more specifically referring to femininity (Butler, 1990; McNay, 2000; Malmström, 2009). This makes further studies into the practice both interesting and necessary. This study is focused on lived experiences of breast ironing in Cameroon; more specifically lived experiences have been collected in the capital Yaounde and in two villages in Eastern Cameroon.

1.1 Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to enquire into the lived experiences of breast ironing and query into the assumptions that it mainly is to be understood as a practice of controlling and restricting female sexuality. In conceptualising breast ironing as a performative practice and drawing upon critical feminist theory, the aim is to provide a further the understanding of this practice, which so far has received little attention. Breast ironing is within this realm approached as performative practice that has influence on the generation of individual identities and in particular gendered identities. Furthermore, the purpose is to add to the scant body of research on the practice of breast ironing.

The study explores the following research questions:

- What notions of femininity are invoked in the performances of breast ironing?
- In particular, what notions of desired female sexuality are invoked in the performances of breast ironing? To what extent are notions of female sexuality portrayed as something which has to be controlled or evoked? What other notions of femininity are evoked in the practices of breast ironing?

1.2 Problem/Relevance

Around the world there exist practices that target women and girls in different ways. Breast ironing is, as previously mentioned, considered to be one such harmful practice. That being said, FGC has been explained as a practice that is not necessarily harmful in its aims, but rather functions as an empowering practice both for practitioners and those who experiences it (*see for example* Dellenborg, 2005; Malmström, 2009). Research around FGC has a diversity of understandings and experiences, and it is necessary not to simply view a complex social phenomenon from an external point of view and draw conclusions based in preconceived ideas, or our immediate, often visceral emotional reactions. This kind of approach often leads researchers to make condescending and even disabling conclusions, where those who have experienced the practise first hand are, and in a rather paternalistic manner, considered not to know what is best way to think about what happened to them.

From my point of departure the problem is twofold. First, there is dire need for new research on a topic with has thus far been woefully under-investigated. As the literature review will show research on the topic is very limited. Something which is reflected in the most common question I have encountered during the process of researching and writing this thesis, “*Breast ironing, what is that?*”. This ignorance and lack of understanding of a practice that is experienced by a large number of girls symptomatic of incomplete narratives around the gendered body and its meanings. Second, there is a lack of theoretically informed studies. The previous studies that I have managed to collect data that focuses on the practice of breast ironing are without a theoretical framework. Hence, there is an apparent need to present one such study.

Throughout the process of research and discussing with interviewees and informants in Cameroon it soon became clear that breast ironing is generally not considered an issue worth attention. I was also generally met with questions of why I spent time on it and considered it important. When I brought up the practice with Cameroonians generally one of two positions were taken. Either one of ridicule for my interest in the practice, either one of negligence of the mere existence of the practice. Hence, either an acknowledgment of the existence of the practice but disregard for its possible importance, or a simple statement on the non-existence of such a practice in the country.

However, when the group was more diverse, despite the initial negligence, numerous personal experiences and recollections were presented. Often this was presented with great amusement, including among individuals working with other types of harmful practices and

violence against women. When I first arrived in Ndumbi I was told that it was unlucky that I had come there to study breast ironing since it was not practiced in the village, and therefore I would not find anyone to speak to about it. This was however soon refuted and contested, and instead it rather confirmed earlier findings indicating that it is possible to find at least 10 percent who have experiences of breast ironing (personal interview Ndonko, 2013). Thus, as Dellenborg (2005) describes, I also began to research process by questioning my interest in the subject, but was, through the openness and interest, of the interviewees convinced that this was a topic the urgently required greater research.

1.3 Limitations

As will become apparent there are things that relates to breast ironing, gendering practices, and performativity that is not brought up within the scope of this thesis. The number of participants within this study has been limited due to in part the possibility of finding individuals who were willing to share their experiences of a practice that pertains to a very personal experience. Furthermore, the number of participants has been limited as a result of the choice of carrying out interviews in conjunction with a closed workshop where a limited number of women and girls were participating. The interviewees do to a large degree share the experience of being young mothers, which can have an effect on their way of approaching and experiencing their position in society. That is, by being young mothers they are likely to have experienced stigmatisation and harassment and thereby have more negative experiences of being a woman or girl. Nevertheless, it should not be disregarded that each individual have their personal experiences and interpretations of events.

The interviewees for this study has been located and selected through their affiliation with the organisation RENATA. This means that the selection can be viewed as very limited because it is based in a pre-arranged selection done through their voluntary participation in the organisation and their similar backgrounds as being young mothers. This did in particular put a limitation on the age span of those interviewed. However, since there are no references made to historical facts about the practice, and because the purpose is to see to the lived experiences age is not a primary factor of relevance. Therefore, it is deemed an appropriate means to find interviewees and their personal experiences are not considered to be dependent on their age.

In media and by the GIZ and RENATA the practice is presented as being first discovered in 2005, when they first came across the phenomenon. This however does only mean that the first official documented research was carried out at this time. It does not provide for historical references or reflections. Further, literary research within this study has not found any earlier

writings. Thus, this study is based on references dating back only to 2005, but it is acknowledged that the practice may or may not have a long history in different forms of existence. Some, including GIZ and RENATA, has attempted to develop theories for the roots of the practice, the historical perspective is however not a focal point within the scope of this thesis. This as the present study seeks to relate and place the practice in the context of present-day Cameroon.

Due to the formulation of the research questions and the aim of this study, no men were reached out to as interviewees directly on the subject of breast ironing. This did however come up in unstructured interviews and conversation, and men were spoken to with the aim of finding out more about their perception of women and their respective expected roles and places within society.

This study has been carried out in Cameroon. However, the bulk of previous research has been retrieve through contacts with GIZ and RENATA along with extensive searches on various internet based catalogues for academic publications. There is hence a possibility that there are studies that are beyond their knowledge and the findings of my literature review. However, as the two larger studies, discussed in the following chapter, and the two smaller complimentary ones, along with articles and blog-posts reproduces the same approaches and general understanding of the practice, it is deemed that this possible lack of academic input is not likely to alter the hypothesis, empirics, analysis or conclusions of this study.

1.4 Previous Research on Breast Ironing

There are two larger studies carried out on the practice of breast ironing. One is qualitative in nature (Topscott, 2012) and the other uses a more mixed-methods approach where quantitative data is supported by qualitative interviews (Ndonko and Ngo'o, 2006). The first study was published in 2006 and carried out by GIZ and RENATA.³ In connection to the release of this study several news articles were published, these do however generally only relate back to the first study and the findings presented there. Between the 2006 and the 2012 I have managed to find only two other independent studies that are smaller in nature.

The study carried out by Topscott engages in an intertwined presentation of previous findings and qualitative data carried out by the author. This means that the study ends up reproducing the same data, albeit presenting new experiences of the practice. Interestingly however, is that neither Topscott nor Ndonko and Ngo'o present any theoretical points of departures that can

³ GIZ is during the spring of 2014 carrying out a followup study, however at the time of writing I have not been able to retrieve this study or to obtain the results of the same.

guide the reader through the analysis. Since the Topscott study builds strongly on the one carried out by GIZ and RENATA their conclusions are very similar and both emphasises that this is not a practice that can merely be considered a harmful practice but needs also be recognised for a focus on protection of the girl who experiences it.

It is not possible to determine whether breast ironing is something that has a long history or has developed in a closer time frame. Some argue that “[b]reast ironing has existed as long as Cameroon has existed” (Fernández Ortiz, 2011), however there are no dated studies or other evidence to confirm this argument. Ndonko and Ngo’o (2006) indicates that the practice may have its roots in a practice called breast massage which rather had the aim of inducing lactation or correct the size and shape of the breasts. They do however only imply this as a possible source of the practice. This study along with those following it, have difficulties in determining whether breast ironing originates from urban or rural areas. Statistics in the study presented in 2006 points towards it being more common in urban areas (Ndonko and Ngo’o, 2006). This must however be seen in relation to the relatively recent development of cities in Cameroon (Fernández Ortiz, 2011).

One of the previous studies presents breast ironing as a public health issue (Ndifor, 2007), while resting on the 2006 study in conjunction with news articles presented in relation to the release of the RENATA GIZ report. The objectives of that study was to first assess the available literature on the subject and second to assess the prevalence, health consequences and policies in relation to breast ironing. It is thus a study made based on a limited amount of secondary sources. Ndifor reproduces much of the central findings and statistics presented by Ndonko and Ngo’o (2006).

There is a literature overview done presented in 2007 (Ndifor), this study takes departure in a want to suggest a research plan, where breast ironing is defined as a public health issue. This study reaffirms the lack of any scientific research on the subject of breast ironing and emphasises the need for the same. All the while Topscott (2012) presents what can be interpreted as scientific findings and conclusion on health effects resulting from breast ironing. However, there is as of yet no published scientific study made.

Bawe (2011:4) provides a short study where breast ironing is defined as a “harmful traditional practice in Cameroon.” This study is making references to the GIZ and RENATA study as well as to the one by Ndifor. Bawe (2011) do through readings of these studies along with news articles. The study or report does not present any additional and it depicts breast ironing in a rather unannounced fashion: “Breast ironing, known as a form of mutilation is another weird practice whereby pubescent girls breasts are flattened” (Bawe, 2011:5). Bawe does hence take a

condescending approach towards the practice and especially the practitioners, placing the burden of guilt on the practitioners. Hence, it leaves it at the conclusion that the practice is harmful and carried out with the aim of suppressing the sexuality of the girl. Bawe does however also make indications to an understanding of the practice as an expression of a want to protect the girl from harm.

The use of the word flattened is used by Bawe (2011) to describe what happens to the breasts of the girl. The choice of terminology differs between the different studies. Nevertheless, Bawe presents the practice as breast ironing as do Ndonko and Ngo'o (2006) and Ndifor (2007), Topscott (2012) does in contrast chose to use the term breast flattening as it is argued to be a better indicator of the diversity of expressions of the practice. In news articles both terms are possible to find. There are of course pros and cons with both concepts and maybe another would be better altogether. Nevertheless, the terminology which is closest to the one used by practitioners and those who themselves have experiences of the practice seems most appropriate to use within this realm. Hence, disregarding the argument by Topscott of wanting to represent the disparity of expressions of the practice and adopt the terminology applied by Ndonko and Ngo'o along with Bawe and Ndifor.

1.5 Structure of the Study

The introduction and background is followed by the Theoretical Framework & Methodological Considerations. This part begins by presenting the Theoretical Framework and Core Concepts used for the study, and provides a necessary backdrop for the elaborations of the thereafter following parts. Post structural feminism is presented as the basic theoretical point of departure in conjunction with a postcolonial theoretical thinking. The core concepts presented are lived experiences, performativity and embodiment which are central for the analysis. This leads to the Methodological Framework which discusses the means of data collection, which are semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews together with participant observation. This chapter furthermore elaborates on the position of me as a researcher in relation to the context and subject of study. The thereafter following chapter is divided into two main parts - Empirical data and Analysis. The empirical data is then divided into three parts: the first considers meanings and significations of breasts; the second presents motivations for breast ironing using a perceived need to hamper or restrict sexuality; and the third part focuses on motivations that contrary seeks to protect the girl from harm. The following analysis brings the three parts together and analyses the practice of breast ironing with a

point of departure in it being a performative practice. The Conclusion and Further Discussion is the last part of the study and seeks to combine a summary of the analytical findings with an elaborated discussion on the meanings of the findings.

PART II – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

2. Theoretical Framework & Core Concepts

This study seeks to explore breast ironing by looking at lived experiences through a theoretical framework built around performativity. This section presents the theoretical framework and the core concepts that will be used throughout this thesis. The theoretical framework that is developed in this section will act as both a backdrop and frame to the study and as a way to conceptualise the topic.

This qualitative study is grounded in a feminist post-structuralist understanding of the world, it is hence understood that “the very act of speaking about experience is to culturally and discursively constitute it” (Maynard, 1994:23). This means that individuals are part in the creation and construction of their own social world, its constraints and opportunities. This reasoning places emphasis on the focus on lived experiences that this thesis takes. Lived experiences can be approached as our “situated, immediate, activities and encounters in everyday experience” (Chandler and Munday, 2012). Hence, our individual appreciation and interpretation of our everyday lives and the events that we encounter. By this, lived experiences are placed as central in relation to the purpose of this thesis, and in relation to the research questions. This means that notions of femininity are explored as they are experienced by women and girls who have experienced the practice of breast ironing. Furthermore, lived experiences of the practice are understood to be central in the want to explore notions of female sexuality that are evoked by the practice of breast ironing. The thesis therefore seeks to approach the research questions from the perspective of those who have actual experience of it. As Hosken (1993) points out with regard to research on female genital cutting, much related research is done with a reductionist point of departure and with a focus only in the negative aspects.

This post-structuralist approach and the reasoning around lived experiences can equally be applied to the gendering of identities – “it is not upon physiology that values can be based; rather, the facts of biology take on the values that the existent bestows upon them” (Beauvoir, 1989:36). What this implies is that the body in itself is not by its biological construction gendered, rather it is discursive practices and social actors through their actions and practices that gender the body. Hence, specific bodily features and bodies has to be pronounced as gendered and thereby they become gendered.

Although the subject in poststructuralism is social constructed in discursive practices, she non the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available (Weedon, 1987:125)

The feminist approach provides room for understanding actions, choices and expressions that relates to identity categories and permits for adherence to the reality that women are oppressed “by having to be women” (Rubin, 1975:204). There is a prevailing dichotomy between the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’, where sex refers to *biological* difference between ‘men’ and ‘women’, while gender refers to *social* difference between the roles assigned to ‘men’ and ‘women’ – i.e. the *social* difference “between males’ and female’s roles or men’s and women’s personalities” (Connell, 2002:33). Gender is, following this reasoning, defined as referring “to a social and cultural construct differentiating women and men, and defining the ways in which women and men interact with each other. [...] Gender and gender roles are culturally specific, learned, changeable over time, and influenced by variables such as age, race, class, and ethnicity” (Strickland and Duvvry, 2003:3). Gender must therefore be understood as a generalising concept that refers to context specific factors and as being ever changing.

Butler provides, through the concept of performativity, a way of understanding and approaching how identities are constantly created and recreated through a compulsory reiteration of prior and subjective norms (Butler, 1993:22). From the performative standpoint it is understood that behaviour which follows social expectations and norms are learnt throughout life, within schools families and communities. It is through in this theoretical approach that breast ironing can be approached as a performative practice. Prinsloo (2003) contends that it has to be acknowledged that identities and behaviour are not something that materialise in adulthood but are constructed from birth. These discourses are not limited to words but should be understood as words, representations, knowledge, attitudes and values, “which consequently have material effects through our actions on ourselves and others” (Prinsloo, 2003:27).⁴ This means that our social reality is not given but should instead be understood as continually created “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign” (Butler, 1988:519). Thus, there is nothing prior to the continual creation through subject interaction. This same understanding is valid also for gendering of subjects, which are dependent on the process of coming into being. As Butler (1988) explains, there is no

⁴ Prinsloo (2003:27) is leaning towards a Foucauldian understanding of discourse and defines it as “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements (Foucault, 1980:132)”.

“I” before, the “I” has to be named “I” in order to exist. That is in our socially constructed world, each subject needs to be named to come into existence. “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, 1997:410). This means that, in our socially constructed world, each subject needs to be named in order to come into existence. Furthermore it means that gendered subjects need to be understood as a process of ever-continuing “performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1988:520). The essential point is that masculinities and femininities are not tied to the male or the female sexes. “Gender practices involve an understanding of gender as a lived process rather than a proper object that we are each magically endowed with as an unwritten consequence of our sex. [...] gender is a set of relations configured through technologies, bodies, and spatial, discursive and material processes” (Nayak and Kehily, 2013:5).

This entails that gender is an identity “instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1997:402). Butler furthermore states that gender is also “instituted through the stylisation of the body” (*ibid*). This means that the gendered identity is to be understood as a process of ever-continuing “performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief” (*ibid*). Though this understanding it is given that there is room for transformation of norms, since no one reiteration is identical to another (Butler, 1993:22; McNay, 2000:34). Performativity entails that the reiterated norms are unavoidable, but work to constrain the gendered subject all the while providing for resistance, subversion, and displacement (Butler, 1993:22) thus, outer influences e.g. modernisation processes can have effect on practice, such as approaches to girls and women, all the while also generating different strategies to meet these changes.

Beauvoir (2006:325) famously said: “One is not born a woman, but becomes one”. What she highlights is the point of departure for this study – gender is socially created. In the same way as your mother tongue is not something you are born with but rather you learn, identity and gender are understood to be learnt and taught in the same fashion (De Swan, 2003). Rather it is experiences and learnt expectations that form an individual into a subjectivity, which is then judged and evaluated depending on its appropriateness for given situations. That is the expectations of woman and man, along with other identities that one can be ascribed and embodies, exist within the particular context in which the subjects exist (Youngblood Jackson, 2004; Weedon, 1996). Thus, each subject is constantly involved in a process of learning and interpreting, a process that shapes

the individual identity as well as communal understanding of the world and its subjects. This serves to emphasise that no one identity nor gender role is stable, but rather in a constant reformulation where performativity is central (Butler, 1988).

Breast ironing is understood as one such performative practice, that inadvertently or intentionally, becomes an informant in the continual accomplishment of meaning of social phenomena. If the practice is conceptualised as a performative practice then it becomes possible also to consider it in light of Butler's (1993) approach, as something which is both part in reiterating and restricting norms. While at the same time it must also be approached as a practice that may provide for resistance, subversion, and displacement (Butler, 1993:22). Hence, breast ironing may well be approached as a constraining practice, but need also be considered as a practice that provides for an empowering sense of room of manoeuvre and as a means to increase the security of girls and young women. By looking at the lived experiences of individuals it is possible see how "economic, political and cultural forces impinge on daily lives" (McNay, 2004 as quoted in Malmström, 2009:14). This provides an understanding of how actions can be placed somewhere in between free will and social structure, norms and discourses (McNay, 2004:175f), actions and choices, can be found to have both subjective motives and be inflected by external values. This in turn provides room for approaching breast ironing as a practice as one that is both the result of external values, while at the same time being carried out through conscious choices.

There are also specific ideals and norms that are attached to specific identities. One such identification is gender, which is defined and created through the application and correlation of specific attributes, expectations, norms and values. Women (and men respectively) are by this understanding forming their bodies in order to make them into female bodies. "Feminine socialization trains women to view the body as an object of appreciation rather than an instrument one might *use* to effect action in the world" (Burrow, 2009:129). This should however not be interpreted as though women are passive in the process of embodiment. Instead "typically, the human body *is* an agency, inevitably transforming through its actions both the world and itself" (Meynell, 2009:1).

"Power differentially *constitutes* particular kinds of bodies and empowers them to perform particular kinds of task, thus constructing different kinds of subject' (italics in original, Gatens, 1996:66). Following the aforementioned performative stance towards how identities and personas are developed, the social processes around bodies and how they are viewed in society follow the same reasoning. Norms around what a body should look like at a certain point in life are strongly

intertwined with (Orbach, 2009). “There is no already pre-given body – that is too simplistic. Everybody is made with the imprint of the familial body story” (Orbach, 2009:57).

Embodiment is one thematisation of agency which denotes that gender identity can be understood as “a lived set of embodied potentialities, rather than as an externally imposed set of constraining norms” (McNay, 2000:23). Thus, the body cannot be viewed purely as an object nor purely as a subject – it is not merely passively acted upon but also acts upon the world it exists in (McNay, 2000:33). Mahmood moves this thinking a step further and emphasises that agency must also be viewed in relation to the context within which it is taken, and not only be considered as “resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable” (Mahmood, 2005:18, emphasis in original). This means that the body should be approached as something which is shaped and formed through social interaction, through discursive practices as well as physical modifications. All the while the body also exists within a context and therefore impacts the same context.

Embodiment is one way to understand how cultural ideals of gender influence and shape our bodies. We are born with our bodies but their shape is not predetermined, instead they are from infancy formed and shaped to adhere to social expectations. These expectations are projected on our bodies first from our families, for example in how sings of similarity with the family are sought for on the infant, and then also form society at large. Furthermore, our bodies are formed to fit into and suit the needs we have in order to lead our lives (Orbach, 2009). In other words, through expectations, connotations and physical modification our bodies are shaped to fit into models depending on ideas and needs. Baxter emphasises that the self and agency is to be found in all structures of hierarchy and authority – “the most basic being that of parent and child” (Baxter, 2007:745).

2.1 Postcolonial Feminism

This thesis seeks to explore women and girls lived experiences something which needs to be done with a high presence of awareness of issues that are invoked in this approach. The feminist approach that this thesis takes is aforementioned; however this is not sufficient to generate an aware entry into the field and analysis of the empirical data. Hill Collins (2000), bell hooks (1988, 2000) and Mohanty (1988, 2003) among others have pointed out the importance of approaching women’s experiences not from a homogenising approach but rather to consider intersecting factors such as “race, class, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, nationality, and globalization, stressing the

interconnectedness as well as differences of these experiences” (Adomako Ampofo *et al.*, 2008:329). De los Reyes (2011) emphasises that a central flaw in postcolonial as well as feminist thought is the fact that those two function in parallel and without connection. Postcolonial feminist seeks to interweave the two approaches in order to provide for an acknowledgement and analysis of how political, economic, cultural and social factors impinge on women’s lives in different ways.

There is not one feminism, nor is there only one kind of feminist. Audre Lorde (2003) argues that the first step for any analysis of a patriarchal system must be to acknowledge difference and to consider it a strength. A postcolonial feminist approach seeks to shed light on the impossibility of analysing power structures if the point of departure is one of binaries, in particular the idea that men and women make up two heterogeneous groups. Instead we must, arguably, approach power structures as made up of intersecting differentiating factors. Central to this approach within postcolonial feminism is learning about ‘the other’ woman by enquiring into her lived experiences, to see her as an individual, apart from stereotypes presented in popular media (Mohanty, 1988, 2002, 2003). This view is however not limited to the postcolonial feminist approach, what makes this theoretical standpoint interesting and essential for this study is the way in which it emphasises the ‘Us’/‘Them’ dichotomy that can be traced to the colonial period.

This is relevant in the conceptualisation of women, which is necessary for the purpose of this study. The conceptualisation of woman cannot, within this realm, be used without problematizing the biologically essential underpinnings of it. Women do in fact not share the same experiences and expectations, nor do they maintain the same position within political, economic or social representations. “The relationship between Woman – a cultural and ideological composite ‘Other’ constructed through diverse representational discourse (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.) – and women – real, material subjects of their collective histories – is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address” (Mohanty, 1988:66). What Mohanty points out is the necessity of separating the individual and the collective generalising of experiences and expressions. Within this scope this is central as the thesis seeks to portray lived experiences. What Mohanty emphasises is hence the need to make sure not to make generalisations about collectives based on individual experiences.

Mohanty (1988) furthermore argues that the concept of women in itself presupposes a homogenous group that can be defined and identified before getting to know the subjects or the process of analysis. This is a homogeneity that is projected not through biological essentials writes Mohanty, but rather results from sociological presumptions. What women are supposed to share is

oppression – the same oppression. “It is at this point that an elision takes place between ‘women’ as a discursively constructed group and ‘women’ as material subjects of their own history” (Mohanty, 1988:53). What Mohanty points at is a central argument/issue relating to work with analysis of a specific phenomenon within a diverse context. This as it is necessary not to refer to the subjects within the study in a way where they are produced as the ‘Third World Woman’ – “as a singular monolithic subject” (Mohanty, 1988:65).

2.2 My Positionality

I have sought throughout the work with this thesis to think reflexively about my position in relation to the subject of the study and my social location. I cannot step away from factors such as me being a white, Western, middle-class, educated woman, who enters into a context where this background is by default different from those I engage with. This background is something that I have tried to keep close in mind while working with the thesis as these are factors that influences my way of interpreting and relating to the subject. This means that I as a researcher cannot and do not aspire to provide an objective truth or objective analysis on the subject of breast ironing. Nor should this study be seen as an attempt to display the absolute truth about the practice. As Pedwell (2007:38) states:

I am aware that my location produces particular (partial) ways of looking at the world, including specific ways of evaluating issues of representation relating to embodied cultural practices. I am also conscious that my privileged position implies clear possibilities of reinforcing dominant relations of power.

Nevertheless, my background should not be read as a kind of debilitating or self-fulfilling narrative either. For as little as the interviewees represent the same thoughts, interpretations and ideas of all Cameroonian women, despite some of them on paper having similar backgrounds and experiences, I do not by default share the same interpretations as someone else who is generalised as adhering to the white, Western, middle-class, educated woman categories either. My identity must equally be understood and approached through the theoretical precepts provided through performativity and embodiment.

3. Methodological Framework

The purpose of this study is to explore what notions of femininity that are expressed or invoked in the performances of breast ironing. In order to do this the thesis seeks to enquire into lived

experiences of the practice. Breast ironing is conceptualised as a performative practice meaning that it is understood to be part in a larger process of gendering identities. The empirical data collected is thereby used to find what notions of femininity that are invoked in the performances of breast ironing. Furthermore, through interviews on lived experiences the study seeks to explore what notions of desired female sexuality are invoked in the performances of breast ironing. A focus on significations of breasts and the motivations that are brought forth for breast ironing; this means that the notions of sexuality as evoked through breast ironing are operationalised through the lived experiences and expressions on meanings of the practice. Within this scope it has been deemed that interviews are the most suitable method for the enquiry into lived experiences of breast ironing in support of participant observation.

3.1 Interviews

For this study two interview methods were chosen and carried out, individual semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews. These were chosen as they to some degree complement each other but for the purpose of the study it was deemed that one or the other was not enough on its own. Furthermore, they were chosen because they are suitable for different settings and preconditions. Unstructured-interviews allow the researcher to be more spontaneous and collect interview data at any time. Semi-structured interviews on the other hand are carried out in a more structured fashion, calling for more time for each interview all the while leading room for the discussion to develop by following leads from the interviewees.

The interviews were mainly carried out in French but a few also in English. French and English are colonial languages in Cameroon and there exist over 250 various languages across the country. However, the main language used for communication at all levels of society in Yaounde is French, of course exceptions are to be found. Also in the Eastern region French is the general language for communication. This in combination with the high number and vast diversity of language the choice was made to carry out interviews on lived experiences in French. The week-long workshops that I attended were likewise all carried out in French. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the lack of choice of language for the interviewees is an issue. Spivak (1988) does for example emphasise the fact that experiences are not expressed in the same way in different languages. There is thereby a possible limitation to be found here, as not all interviewees necessarily consider French to be the language that is being used for everyday communication.

3.1.1 Selection - Context & Composition of Interviews on Lived Experiences

The process of reaching out to interviewees was done through two main channels: UNFPA, and RENATA and GIZ. The choice to use these two channels was that they could assist me with the entry into the field and provided me with a possibility to in a good way be introduced to the potential interviewees.

The interviews for this study were carried out in three different locations: Yaounde, Ndumbi, and Djiang. These specific locations were chosen in part due to the availability of contacts and other simplifying means, such as possible transportation. Most importantly due to statistical findings indicating that the region had a relatively high rate of cases of breast ironing. It is furthermore relevant due to a want to carry out interviews and observations in both urban and rural contexts.

Yaounde is the political capital of Cameroon and is located in the central region. The interviews in Yaounde were carried out at two different occasions. The first was done in connection to a workshop on advocacy for young mothers held at the offices of RENATA. The participants consisted of about 15 women and out of these those with experiences of breast ironing were invited to share their experiences with me. The second occasion was in the form of scheduled interviews where RENATA reached out further in their network in Yaounde. They had one instruction, to reach out to women who had experiences of breast ironing and were willing to share their experiences for the purpose of an academic thesis. In total 10 women with experience of breast ironing were spoken to in Yaounde using the method of semi-structured interviews.

Ndumbi and Djiang are both villages located in the Eastern region of Cameroon. In Ndumbi 14 women were spoken to. These women did all take part in a week-long RENATA- and GIZ led workshop on sexual and reproductive health and rights targeting young mothers. This group, consisting of over 60 women, was homogenous in the sense that the women had similar experiences (all being young mothers), and were within the age group 13-28.

In Djiang five women were spoken to. They did in the same way as the women in Ndumbi take part in a week-long workshop on sexual and reproductive health and rights. The lower number of women sharing their experiences in Djiang can be explained in part as a result of the group being large, comprising close to 100 women and their young children. This is a factor that negatively affected the will and possibility to take part in the interviews. This in combination with the outlining of the hall in which the work-shop was carried out did not allow for easy movement, which meant that in order to share her experiences she would have to call attention to herself in front of the whole clientele.

3.1.2 Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews take place “all the time and just about anywhere-in homes, walking along a road, weeding a millet field, hanging out in bars, or waiting for a bus” (Bernard, 1994:210). These kinds of interviews have been essential for this study since it enables to collect data on lived experiences and the everyday social context. The reason for me to include unstructured interviews as a method for collecting data for this study has been the fact that it provides for acquiring information or data as it occurs. It is neither always possible nor preferable to plan and schedule and interview with a subject that you encounter and who is open to discuss their experiences and lives. This method was not used to any particular extend but has provided for sales-women, women working in restaurants, taxi-chauffeurs, friends and their acquaintances to become interviewees for this study. By always bringing the thought of the study with me at all points I made sure to take every opportunity to ask questions related to breast ironing and women’s situation in particular and Cameroon in general.

I have used this method to collect data on a more spontaneous level. Essentially I have tried to bring my purpose of being present in Cameroon into conversations and by this opened up for and initiated a sharing of experiences and knowledge by those who are interested, all the while keeping in mind my thought through plan and purpose. This method has thus enabled to, when appropriate, collect data and to bring in points of views and experiences from different angles and perspectives. Hence, unstructured interviews have been used during the time spent in Cameroon and has been used when an appropriate situation occurred. The interviewees were aware of the purpose of my stay and the fact that what they shared would be part in the study. Notes were made during and after these conversations.

3.1.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary method for collection of data has been semi-structured interviews focusing around lived experiences of breast ironing and thoughts about gender roles and the society in general. The discussion and interviews were carried out with both girls and women who have experienced the practice. The interviews were carried out individually with me sitting down in a setting where we could speak without being disturbed by other individuals. The choice of semi-structured interviews stems from the want and need to take part in lived experience without leading the interview too strictly. This means that I chose to develop an interview guide with topics, and only a few introductory questions (Bryman, 2008). This allowed me to follow the interviewee in her thoughts,

all the while keeping the all of the interviews on the same track. As semi-structured interviews are based on open-ended questions it provides for the possibility to let relevant issues lead the interview through follow-up questions (Mikkelsen, 2005). Thus, the interviewee has power to decide what issues they feel are of importance given the subject of the interview. In total 21 interviews were carried out, nine in Yaounde and 12 in Ndumbi and Djiang.

The interviewees were asked to speak of their lives, if needed guiding questions/themes such as family, education, work, and children. They were then asked to recollect what they had experiences in terms of breast ironing, if needed through guiding questions/themes such as “when was it carried out”, “who carried it out”, “why was it carried out”, “what were you told about the reasons for carrying it out”, “what were the ‘results’”. The theme that generally gained most focus was concerning why it was carried out. I may have been a driving factor here since this is the purpose of the study. This means that if the interviewee did not recollect any particular fact, they were asked if they could think of any purposes in hindsight, reflecting on their own experiences growing up as girls and in their current roles as women. This was then turned into a deeper discussion on how the practice was motivated. That is a development of the discussion on why it was carried out.

In the cases where men and boys were brought up in relation to the practice and among motivations for carrying out breast ironing the interview was let to focus on this as a means to develop the understanding of how men and boys could be found as a motivating factor. Some of the interviewees brought their young children, something that generally spurred them to reflect on their thoughts about carrying out the practice on their own daughters, or their ideas out their sons’ future roles in relation to girls and women.

Before the actual interview process begun there was an idea to also carry out group interviews. This as this method of interviewing often is considered to have the potential to bring forth more topics and ideas among the participating interviewees. However, once in Cameroon it became clear that this was not a suitable method. In part due to the already mentioned taboo surrounding sexuality in general and breast ironing in particular. In part due to the constitution of the interviews and the setting in which they were carried out. It is possible that this could have been arranged but it was deemed better to focus on the individual interviews and my participant observation in connection to the work-shops where the majority of the semi-structured interviews were carried out. In part the purpose of the study was also determinant in the choice not to include group interviews, this in the sense that lived experiences are personal and therefore the experiences

may be affected if they are shared while others are listening and maybe shares their opinions. All the while, it is acknowledged that interesting and important points and issues may have been missed that may have been brought up during group interviews.

3.1.4 Interviews with Organisations and Political Representatives

For the purpose of this study, I chose to carry out interviews with representatives of different civil society representations and political representatives who in different ways work with issues relating to breast ironing. This choice was taken based on the little previous research done on breast ironing and the need to build a base for departing into the subject. These interviews were carried out using an interview guide, which allowed me to use the same questions also in the cases where a face-to-face interview was made impossible due to distance and infrastructural hinders.

The insights from these interviews have been guiding for the understanding of what the interviewees expressed. This means that these interviews are not extensively cited within the empirical or analytical section of the thesis but rather should be understood as having functioned as informative in the interpretation of lived experiences and as a means to be able to better understand the social and cultural complexities facing women and girls in Cameroon.

The organisations that were approached were: Cameroonian National Association for Family Welfare (CAMNAFAW), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH (GIZ), Ministry for the Promotion of Woman and Family (MINPROFF), Network for More Women in Politics (N.M.W.P), Plan International Cameroon, (RENATA), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Women in Alternative Action (WAA) Cameroon.

3.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation has been carried out as a complement to the interviews. The aim of the observations has been to provide for a better picture of how social interaction takes place in day-to-day encounters in public spaces. This means that primarily observations have been used as a compliment to the interviews, for example when participating at workshops I was enabled to collect data that I have incorporated in my understanding and analysis of the practice of breast ironing. This has been deemed essential because the motivations found in previous reports relates to how girls and women are perceived by the public ‘male’ eye. The inclusion of participant observation made it possible to “improve the degree to which the products of the research (written accounts/

ethnography) provide as valid a view of the context and phenomena under investigation as possible” (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011:110). This means that observations has been focusing primarily on looking at and interpreting how women and girls are approached and perceived in Yaounde (primarily) and Ndumbi (during the limited amount of time spent there).

Since the socio-cultural context is vital for the study, observations have been an important method to improve the general understanding of the context of study. However, it should be noted that I as a researcher, foreigner and an outsider is affected by my background and experiences when I interpret and perceive what I observe. There are differences in how various events are experiences and its meanings in different contexts and what I interpret may be wrong from actual meanings. This means that I bring with me previously determined ways to look at reality. Nevertheless, this will of cause be formed through the constant reiteration process and my perception and interpretation of what I see developed during my stay in Cameroon. However, it is still a fact that it is a question of how I view and transform what I see into information. A second important issue is the way in which an observer chooses what to observe. I will only see what attracts my attention, something which is dependent on my background and preconceived ideas of what I will see, albeit this may not be what is in fact the most important or relevant phenomenon. Thus, there is a process of conscious and unconscious choice making going on all the while I am aware of my role as participant observer.

Participant observation was carried out at each time I left the house, and observations were scribbled down as they were occurring. In some cases they were written down at a later point in time, making for misinterpretation and alterations of what I was as memory is not exact. This means that in addition to interpretation and choices, a time dimension has been involved in the observation process.

3.3 Reflections & Ethical Considerations

All interviews were carried out on a voluntary basis, where those who wanted to share their experiences were asked to go to a separate room; therefore it was not possible to beforehand know how many interviewees that would participate during each interview day.

All interviewees were asked if they were okay with the interview being recorded and I also informed about the way in which the recordings were to be used. Since the interviews touch upon lived experiences and very personal stories, the interviewees were only kept record of through a system where their age was indicated, the interviews has then throughout the research process been

documented according to chronology and to the place where the interview was carried out. For example the first interview in Ndumbi, is only traceable as Ndumbi1.

PART III – EMPIRICAL DATA & ANALYSIS

This part contains a presentation of the empirical data as well as an analysis of how the practice of breast ironing can be understood through the theoretical framework. The centrality of breasts for this thesis is clear there is an apparent social and cultural focus on this body-part, when it is on a female body. The question is what do they signify for the interviewees? By exploring the significations it is possible to begin to understand what notions of femininity and female sexuality are invoked in the practice of breast ironing. Furthermore, by exploring the motivations for carrying out breast ironing it is possible to gain understandings of what notions of female sexuality around which there is a perceived need for control but also contrary what notions of sexuality that are evoked. However, it needs to be emphasised that the notions of female sexuality as explored here are all connected to the practice of breast ironing and the performance of the same.

The first three sections present the empirical findings and elaborate on the lived experiences on breast ironing. It begins in the perceived significations of breasts and elaborates on their multiple meanings as presented by the interviewees. This is followed by a depiction of experiences of breast ironing as a way to hamper or restrict girls and women's sexuality. This is in turn followed by a presentation of lived experiences of breast ironing that emphasises how the practice necessarily needs to be approached as a means to protect the girl from harm. The last section presents the analysis of the empirical data, with a departure in the theoretical framework previously presented.

4. Significations & Meanings of Breasts

This chapter presents the most prominent significations and meanings of breasts that have been presented during interviews. In essence the significations do all refer to breasts as markers of women and girl's sexuality and they can be comprised to contain of three different strands. First, are considered to signify the physical and mental move from being a girl to becoming a woman of maturity. Second, it indicates that the woman or girl is a sexual being, either through her own embodiment and identification as such, or through the external identification of her as a mature sexualised being. Third, in some instances breast are equated with pregnancy. It is obvious that these significations are intertwined and that they all indicate to some extent the importance of breasts as a sign of femininity.

First of all, breast seems to have a strong influence on the lives of women and girls in Cameroon. When I was listening to the girls and women describing their experiences of breasts ironing and in particular the reasons they brought forth for it, it soon became clear that they had a complicated relationship with their own breasts, and sometimes firm thoughts about those of others

as well. The reasons for this were plenty and the experience of breast ironing was only part of it for some of the interviewees. What hereafter follows is a depiction of the core thoughts about breasts and their meaning as expressed in interviews and as appreciated through observations. It needs to be emphasised that the significations presented here does not comprise of the result of an exhaustive bulk of material rather it is a compilation of the thoughts shared during in-depth interviews with a limited number of individuals.

The arrival and beginning development of the breasts are seen as an indicator of the fact that the girl is commencing to change into a woman. This however is generally not perceived as something positive, and thus the breasts must be hindered from developing.

She told me that I was too small to have breasts⁵

This woman was only told just this, that she was too small. She did not get any further explanation and did not know what she was too small for. Several of the interviewees who had been told similar things did not get any other explanation, and did therefore not really understand why she was considered too small or when it would be more appropriate to have breasts. This signifies however that there is an age or stage of development where it is accepted for the girl to have breasts. Neither of the interviewees were however able to point at any specific age rather it was a question of “grow first” which within this context is very imprecise. Nevertheless, by discussion and reflection some interviewees moved towards an accepted level to have breasts at around 13-14 years old.

I don't know the parents [...] but for the girl it is good to have breasts. But not too early. At the age of 12, 11 years. It is good at 14 years maybe 13 like that. But too early at 11 years, 12 years it's too early...⁶

There is a clear focus on the importance to make sure that the girl is big enough before she has breasts. Big in this sense can be understood both in terms of age and in terms of height and overall physical appearance. This is also part of the idea that girls should be old and grand enough before having breasts. This signifies that the physical development and more importantly the physical appearance of the girl and in particular her breasts are central for the way in which she is socially defined and is approached. Hence, it is not the age of the girl which is important for the way in which she is perceived but rather the way in which her body appears. Does it look like the body of a

⁵ Interview, December 2012: Woman 27, Yaounde Cameroon.

⁶ Interview, May 2013: Woman 18, Ndumbi Cameroon

grown woman, and then she is likely to be perceived as such. What was expressed by the interviewed women and girls is that when you have breasts you are considered to be an adult. To have breasts signifies that you are ready to be sexually involved, but also that you are more likely to want sex. Furthermore, it means that others will perceive you as someone who is likely to be sexually active and to be likely to want sex. This in turn has impact on how you are perceived and perceive yourself. The interviewees meant that these significations of breasts were regardless of your age and generally overshadowed other physical signs indicating your age. This was true both for the girls themselves and for others evaluating the girl. In other words, girls do themselves embody the idea that when their breasts have begun to develop they are adults.

During the workshop in Ndumbi, the participants were asked to point out differences between men and women and also what changes that occurs when one goes through puberty. Both physical and mental changes were presented. What became clear is that there is a set of bodily features along with ways of carrying oneself that are expected from the body of a pubertal and post-pubertal girl/woman. One such emphasised feature was the way one walks, moving the hips more intensely and also by the way one looks around when walking. The audience was unanimous in this portrayal. In addition they also added the way in which breasts and hips were supposed to appear, and to some extent be highlighted. Thus, when entering into puberty, at an accepted age, there are bodily developments that are expected and changes which are welcomed. All the while, the participants were also pointing out that a girl or woman, when entering into puberty also became a subject of the male gaze. That is, as soon as their bodies begun to change they would be considered women and therefore be both viewed and approached in different manners. The central signifier and that which one had to be prepared to have comments on what the breasts.

The visible signs of breasts are core to the appreciation of the young girl. And ultimately determines how she is approached and seen by her peers and community in general. The term puberty was only rarely brought up within the interviews; however it is clear that what was referred to is precisely this experience. That is the arrival of the breasts signifies that the girl is entering into puberty. However, the significations do not end with the arrival of puberty, but leads instead to an interconnected signification – adulthood. This also signifies the definite end of the physical growth period of the girl, something which was presented as an issue by several of the interviewees.

*That you have to grow before having breasts, because [...] when you have breasts you do not grow*⁷

In a general manner it is possible to see that breasts are a sign of maturity, which in turn means that the girl, generally, is viewed a sexualised individual. Thus, the fact that the girl begins to develop breasts implies that she is on her way of entering into adulthood. This is something that brings with it expectations and ideas of what the girl is and how she should behave. However, it is not the physical changes *per se* that the interviewees pointed out as the central issue with these implications of breasts. That is with these significations follow one other that is far more determining. Breasts signify sexuality. The interviewees did, when trying to pinpoint a general reason for breast ironing, highlight the fact that breasts attract men and boys.

*When you see someone the breasts, you say to yourself that she is already a woman, who attracts men*⁸

An important signification, that can be approached as an extension of adulthood, maturity and sexuality, is the fact that breasts are considered to imply pregnancy. This signification is connected to three different experiences. On the one hand is the idea that, as previously presented, a girl who begins to develop breasts is likely to engage in sexual activity and thereby facing the risk of becoming pregnant. Second, breasts were presented as being a direct cause of pregnancy. That is in this understanding breast ironing was presented as a kind of contraceptive method. Delaying the time at which the girl will be able to become pregnant.

*Breasts means children*⁹

It was agreed upon by most of the interviewees in Ndumbi that they and their parents did not agree on the role of women, or rather the way in which they should envision their future. There was a clash in ideas about womanhood and the expression of female sexuality. According to the interviewees their parents, in particular mothers, continuously stressed the importance of marriage and establishment of a family. This parental approach was also acknowledged in discussions I had with a few younger men.

⁷ Interview, May 2013: Woman 18, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

⁸ Interview, May 2013: Woman 22 b, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

⁹ Interview, January, 2013: Woman 31, Yaoundé Cameroon.

For these four men marriage was understood more as a precondition for having children, and starting a family was an important life goal. This was also confirmed by other men that I spoke to and discussed with. For the interviewed women on the other hand the approach was somewhat different. To have children and to want children was not at all put in relation to marriage nor seen as a precondition for having children. However, there was of course a diversity also among the interviewees in relation to this subject.

In Ndumbi the young mothers unanimously stated that it was a failure not to have your first child before the age of 20. The general argument for this was – shame. That is if you did not have your first child before you were 20 you would feel shame, for not living up to the expectations of peers. Furthermore, it was considered essential for identifying as an adult woman, something that was sought for among the young mothers. However, no woman brought up any further explanatory factors for this specific social expectation. Nevertheless, arguably for the one part this is a response to the strong positioning of the identity of a woman as a mother. The other part can be traced to an increased independence sought for by the young women.

What can be said then is that there are several socially and culturally ascribed significations to breasts. These seem to be independent of the age of the female who is found with them, leading to a reality where breast is in fact the marker of maturity and adulthood, and ultimately of sexuality and sexual readiness, rather than age or any other indicator being the primary determinant. The persisting usage of breast ironing also as part of a ritual of passage between childhood and adolescents or adulthood only further emphasises the social signification of breasts as important markers of femininity and sexuality.

5. Hamper and Restrict Sexuality

Breast ironing is by the UN defined as a harmful practice and a central understanding of the concept harmful practice relates to different forms of restrictions of women and girl's sexuality. This chapter presents findings from interviews and observations where breast ironing falls under this terminology. As the previous chapter describes, breasts carries significations that relates to sexuality. In many cases the motivations, as they were understood by the girl who experienced breast ironing, carried strong relations to these significations of breasts.

*I was told that I was too young to have breasts*¹⁰

¹⁰ Interview, January, 2013: Woman 27, Yaoundé Cameroon.

The most commonly used arguments according to the interviewees were that it is no good to for a girl to have breasts too early. There are multiple reasons for this but the most common is that the girl will begin to play and spend time with boys.

*You are too young to have breasts! You will play too much with boys*¹¹

Generally no one of the interviewees who forwarded this motivation had understood, at that point, what this actually meant. This as they had often been playing with boys before as well, but suddenly this was tuned into as an issue that had to be managed. When they, during the interview session, began to reflect on what the person saying it could have meant, the ideas were soon similar to those regarding the significations of breasts.

The idea that breasts implies that the girl is about to transition into another stage in her life, into one where she is viewed as an adult or at least adolescent on the way to becoming an adult. This in itself may not cause an issue for the girl child but instead it is what comes with it which is causing harm. One interviewee meant that it was implied that a girl with breasts who plays with boys has the intention of sexual relations with him.

*Because when you will have breasts, you will tell yourself that you can now love men*¹²

Hence, this woman shared the perception that she had also been told from her aunt who was the one to carry out the breast ironing on her. That is, that there are reasons to make sure that the first does not begin to think of or engage in sexual relations. Thus, breast ironing was here used as a means to restrict girls' sexuality. In other words, breast ironing can be approached as a means to control their sexuality in terms of physical and psychological expressions and thoughts.

That which the woman here below says, is that the breasts are ironed because if they are not she will become stubborn.

*They said that, when my breast have begun to develop, they needed to be pushed back, if not I will be stubborn. And I will soon begin to go out with men*¹³

¹¹ Interview, January, 2013: Woman 27, Yaoundé Cameroon.

¹² Interview, May, 2013: Woman 18, Ndumbi Cameroon.

¹³ Interview, May 2013: Woman 21 Djiang, Cameroon.

From this woman's experience it was clear that there is a perceived connection between girls' behaviour and the development of the breasts. Furthermore, that the solution to this is to push back the breasts. The stubbornness was explained as a different way of saying that the girl will begin to act in opposite to what her family expects and ultimately she will begin to go out with men. This in turn increases her risk of becoming pregnant.

Pre-mature pregnancies were approached differently by different families. As most of the interviewees were young mothers they had all experienced telling their families about this. The reactions had varied from acceptance to a dismissal from the family home and current lack of contact between the family and the girl or young woman. The harsh reactions from the families were explained to be the result of a strong pressure on mothers to make sure that their children and especially girls did not end up in non-socially acceptable situations, early pregnancy being one such thing.

The practice of breast ironing ultimately seeks to for different reasons; make sure that the girl child passes as a child for an extended period of time. This as a result of the various significations that breasts has and the effects this can have for the life of a young girl. These same significations can however also be used as an asset due to their socially ascribed relation to sexuality and maturity. Ultimately some of the women and girls meant that having breasts was rather a positive thing.

In the village of Ndumbi the interviewees did, among other things, point out that they could and did in fact profit from the fact that they at an early age were considered adults. This in the sense that men who were older than themselves showed an interest in them. The fact that these men are older generally means that they are more likely to have their own income and thereby have the possibility to support themselves and possibly someone else as well. Hence for the girls and women perceived that a relationship with an older man would bring them benefits that a relationship with someone closer to themselves in age would not provide. One common argument was the fact that these men often encouraged the girls to continue their education and made promises to pay for their schooling. Unfortunately such promises were not always kept and several of the interviewees agreed to the fact that it was not the best solution. But generally maintained that regarding the options it was worth trying, and some were arguing for the need and want to continue to live their life without being married but still being able to have children. The strategies and approached in order to keep the men were different for some it was important not to become pregnant as this could

hamper the relationship, had the man already a relationship or was simply not interested in having children. In other cases to have a child was deemed a goal.

When discussing gender roles with two young Cameroonian men, it was agreed firmly that it was a fact that women and men have specific roles to play in the society and in their community. In other words there are specificities that are distinguishable and only applies to either of the two genders, and things that they respectively can and cannot do. This approach was also explicitly pointed out among the interviewees in Yaounde, Ndumbi and Djiang. They did ultimately mean that a woman must have children and that it is their (the mother's) responsibility to care for the child.

The social demand and expectations were however generally limited to the young-mothers interviewed and their peers. The idea that a young girl was expected to have children early was not shared by parents and other older adults. The interviewees recollected in a majority of cases how their parents had reacted in a negative fashion when they had found out about their daughter being pregnant. What is essential to recollect here is that the interviewees had become pregnant in some cases at the age of 12. In some cases the girl child was told to leave the household and thereby shunned by her family. A general comment from the parents was that the girl had destroyed her life and prospects for the future. Furthermore, negativity was expressed together with arguments concerning the fact that the girl was unmarried when becoming pregnant. As discussed earlier marriage is a strong cultural and social demand albeit seemingly not to the same extent within the young generation of women.

All the while the parental generation generally reacted negatively to their daughter's pregnancy it was rare that that an interviewee herself had had a negative experience finding out she was pregnant. Rather it was considered, according to the want to have a child before the age of 20, as something positive and meaningful. This was in turn presented as a reason for understanding that mothers and other adults wanted to modify the bodies of young girls and make them less inclined to think that they were already big and begun to prioritise parts of the life of adult women.

Female sexuality is not something which is not perceived as positive to depict in public, nor is it deemed positive for a girl to perceive herself as an adult. This due to the idea that the beginning development of breasts ultimately implies that the girl will begin to, due to the social and cultural significations of breasts, perceive herself as an adult once her breasts begin to develop. This in turn is then thought to bring with it both changes in behaviour and priorities, but also in the arrival of a sexual activity with the girl. A want to hamper or restrict this change in the girl is then one way to approach motivations for carrying out breast ironing.

6. Breast Ironing for Protection & Improvement

The previous section looked at arguments that point towards breast ironing being a practice seeking to hamper girls' sexuality. However, as earlier stated, breast ironing is a complex practice and there are arguments pointing in an opposite direction. The argument that the girl is too young to have breasts must not only be understood as an argument for breast ironing in the sense of hampering the girl's own sexuality. It must also be approached as an argument for the protection of the girl child. This as there are strong indications for this understanding among the interviewees, something which has also been indicated in previous research.

One of the interviewees strongly asserted that her mother had ironed her breasts because she wanted her to not attract men when she was outside of the home. This was an argument that many of the interviewees bought up and looking at the core significations of breasts previously presented it is possible to understand why this argument was very frequent.

I think that maybe because she did not want that I attract men¹⁴

The risks involved in attracting men are several for a young girl, both from the point of view of the girl herself but also from the mother or other practitioner. The first possible risk of being a young woman with breasts is sexual advances by men and boys. This in itself is perceived as negative.

My aunt told me that it is necessary [...] the men will start to admire me. Seeing as I am already big¹⁵

When a girl's breasts begin to develop she is likely to be the target of the 'male gaze'. This in turn means that she is may experience sexual harassment, forced or non-consensual sex and rape. Sexual harassment is something which the interviewees unanimously stated was a reality for women and girls. It was not uncommon to experience this within the family but the most explicit expressions were to be found within the community. A woman who is out in her community was generally used to hearing words and comments about her body. Some of the interviewees saw this as a normal part of their lives while others found it as a distraction and questioned why this had to be. In addition to verbal harassment, women and girls experience high levels of physical sexual advances and rape is

¹⁴ Interview, May 2013: Woman 18, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

¹⁵ Interview, May 2013: Woman 23, Djiang, Cameroon.

common. This was a reality both for the interviewees in Yaounde and in the more rural areas of Ndumbi.

All the while, breast ironing is also used with the motivation that “it must go back first so that [...] I continue for a while my studies”.¹⁶ Hence, there is a want to help the girl to follow through her studies. This approach is maybe more linked to changes in priorities in the life of the girl that for the practitioner is linked to the breasts which in turn are thought to be significations of sexuality. The interpretation of this is then twofold. On the one hand, the argument points towards a want to make sure that the breast of the girl are kept away as this may cause her to decrease her focus in her studies, and instead priorities sexual activities. On the other hand, it can also be understood as a want to keep the girl from being approached by men, to be target of rape or other unwanted sexual attention and ultimately face the risk of becoming pregnant. This way of reasoning is close to the discussion on puberty and the understanding that the breasts are linked to the comportment of the girl. A motivation close to the one following has the same rationalisation. If the girl has breasts she will continue to think that she is already big, something that may hinder her from continuing her studies.

It has to be pushed back because if it begin to push, maybe that I will begin to say that I am already big or else that I will not put my head on my studies¹⁷

An example of this can be found in the motivation that breast ironing is necessary to keep the girl in school. The motivations are, simply put, based on the same factors as have previously been presented; a girl with breasts is more likely to become the target of sexual advances or become sexually active. By removing the most visible physical sign these risks are diminished, among related and secondary effects are pregnancies, which is a risk that in turn makes it very difficult to complete her education. This is because a girl who becomes pregnant is not allowed to go to school. Thereby she is likely to lose at least 2 years of education, should she manage at all to make her way back to school. One woman recollected how she became a young mother and only in her twenties had the possibility to go back to school and continue her education. However, it is not certain that she will ever re-continue her studies. Among the girls in Ndumbi,¹⁸ the majority have experienced

¹⁶ Interview, May 2013: Woman 22 a, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

¹⁷ Interview, May 2013: Woman 22 b, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

¹⁸ I.e. among those interviewed for this study.

this reality after becoming pregnant. One of the primary issues is the stigmatisation that a pregnancy generally means for a girl.¹⁹

Stigmatisation and ridicule was brought forth by many interviewees, and was used as a means to emphasise the need for breast ironing. That is, if the breasts of young girls are not pressed they are very likely to be made fun of. In part because they do not live up to the expected body but also through the significations that breasts have. In other words, if your breasts are let to develop you are likely to be perceived as sexually active and likely to soon become a mother. Therefore was among the interviewees a general agreement to the fact that if your breasts develop too early it is no good. This because yourself family, friends and others are likely to make fun of you, since you do not yet have the proper age. Hence, the signification and focus on breasts in relation to age is present in the girls' lives. This reality also meant according to the women and girls that you feel shame and disgrace if your breasts appear too early. Among the interviewees, a majority mentioned that in their community, it is common that girls, when they begin to develop breast, becomes a target for public opinion, in particular because of their breasts.

When one sees a small girl who already have breasts, one makes fun of her and that attracts men to her²⁰

It is hence a reality where the girls, when they begin to develop breasts also face ridicule from their peers and community. This since they are targeted and evaluated based on their bodies, that is, their physical development and appearance. This may be expressed in the form of verbal harassment, but also in the form of being considered as accessible by (older) men.²¹ As the following quote indicates, the breasts are seen as a sign of maturity, that the individual is an adult with all the significations that this role brings. At the same time this also points towards the way in which girls and women are perceived by the society and their place within the same context.

What she indicates here is the fact that a young girl is not secure, she does not feel at ease in her proper community. At the same time, she is not in a position where she can respond to these harassments. Instead she feels often embarrassment in relation to her breasts in particular and her body and appearance in general.

¹⁹ Personal conversation, December 2012: Woman, Yaoundé, Cameroon.

²⁰ Interview, May 2013: Woman 22 a, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

²¹ Observation, May 2013, Ndumbi. A majority of the Young-mothers in Ndumbi had their first sexual rapports with a man who was at least 5 years older than the girl/woman.

Yes, laugh at of it. It is even intrigued when we see a girl with big breasts, who are still small. We intrigue and laugh at her, everyone in the village, everywhere²²

What is equally highlighted by certain interviewees that also the parents will make fun of the young girl when she develops breasts at an early age. Hence, the girl undergoes this type of harassment everywhere in her community.²³ Also in the school the girl may expect to be a target of ridicule and harassment from both teachers and peers.

When you are still small and your breasts begin to develop, yes your friends will make fun of you because of your age, you do not yet have the age to have breasts. Your friends will make fun of you and you will feel ashamed²⁴

This girl meant that it was because a girl who has breasts is already grand, as a consequence, not someone who you can play with. This because a girl with breasts was viewed as someone different and odd.

When you have breasts one will see that you are already grand²⁵

Hence, the girl is a target of mockery from her peers. As already proposed this reality may cause here to feel inferior, to embody a sentiment where her body is not normal or correct. This is something that in turn is emphasised through the practice of breasts ironing where her body is moderated to fit into the context in which it exists. Furthermore, this may generate a perceived need to hide her breasts and her body. Also, to cause herself to perceive a need to iron her breasts.

The most common is that it is a mother or other woman who is close to the girl that carries out the breast ironing. This implies that the girl is passively acted upon there are however cases where the girl child herself is active and takes part in practicing breast ironing in one of its many forms. This chapter will therefore present experiences from girls and women who has carried out breast ironing on themselves.

There are three possible entries into this choice by the girl child. First, the continuation of breast ironing that has been initiated by someone else. Second, the choice to carry it out as a result

²² Interview, May 2013: Woman 22 b, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

²³ Interview, May 2013: Woman 22 b, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

²⁴ Interview, May 2013: Woman 22 b, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

²⁵ Interview, May 2013: Woman 18, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

from direct influence from someone else. Third, the choice to, without direct, external influence carry out some form of breast ironing on the own body.

I continued to do it when they began to come back²⁶

This woman had her breasts first ironed by her mother, it was successful and her breasts did disappear for a while. When they began to reappear to she decided to continue the ironing herself. The reasons for this according to her were twofold: first, she did not want her mother to see it and re-continue the practice. This because of the pain it caused her; second, because she had a feeling that breasts were something negative, and therefore should be hindered from appearing on her body. Thus, in order to refrain from having pain inflicted by someone else, this girl chose to take control over the situation and the pain. Furthermore, as a measure to make sure that her body had the appearance that she thought appropriate and expected she took the decision to continue the process of shaping her body.

One of the interviewees depicted her experiences as closely intertwined with feelings of shame and a kind of stigmatisation due to her breasts. She chose to carry out the practice on herself to hinder others from making fun of her. She meant that she felt proud about the fact that she could take control of the situation, even though it was very painful.

I did it because I felt ashamed of my breasts. [...] When you are still small and your breasts grow, yes your classmates will make fun of you because your age, you do not have the age to have breasts. Your friends will laugh and you will be ashamed.²⁷

To this point the chapter has focused on experiences of breast ironing that are connected to sexuality and the perceived need to hamper or restrict signs and emotions in relation to this. There are however also other experiences that are not clearly related to this. Following is a depiction of some of these experiences.

If your breasts start to develop:

You will not grow!²⁸

²⁶ Interview, January, 2013: Woman 26, Yaoundé Cameroon.

²⁷ Interview, May, 2013: Woman 19, Ndumbi Cameroon.

²⁸ Interview, January, 2013: Woman 29, Yaoundé Cameroon.

This was a very common explanation for why the interviewee had experienced breast ironing. That is, arguments and motivations pointing to the need and want, from the practitioner, for the girl to grow taller and larger before having breasts. Ultimately then, the arrival of the breasts is signifying the end of physical growth for the girl. It was apparent that it was considered a very negative thing if the girl did not grow tall both as the interviewees had understood it but also according to themselves. Among those who presented this experience there was an unanimity to the idea that it was good to be a large person.

*It is not good to stay small, if your breasts are let to grow you will not grow*²⁹

Hence, it was clear that the development of the breast is seen as equal to when the girl becomes an adult – a woman – and as an adult she will no longer grow. Therefore, it is perceived as necessary to hinder the development of the breasts to allow for the girl to become taller. However, no-one of the interviewees meant that the practice in fact had had the sought for effects, apart from a temporal delay in breast development. One of the girls said that, “it did not work, I have not the size that my mother wanted”.³⁰

One girl recollected how her mother had ironed her breasts because they started to develop too early, but not because she had to grow taller first instead it was related to her menses.

*She did it because I did not yet have my menses. That is what she told me...*³¹

As a consequence, the breasts had to be pushed back while awaiting the arrival of the menses, and hence when the girl had showed other signs of leaving childhood and entering into adulthood or adolescence. The breasts disappeared, but reappeared again after five months, when the girl was 14 years old. However, at this point the girl’s menses had arrived and her mother determined that it was no longer necessary to hinder the breasts from developing.³² This means that there are other important significations of adolescence and adulthood, which are not perceived as negative, as are the signs of breasts in many instances. Hence, it can be established that it is not necessarily the

²⁹ Interview, December 2012: Woman 26, Yaoundé, Cameroon.

³⁰ Interview, December 2012: Woman 28, Yaoundé, Cameroon.

³¹ Interview, May 2013: Woman 19, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

³² Interview, May 2013: Woman 19, Ndumbi, Cameroon.

actual age of the girl that is determining the right time for the breast to appear, but rather the physical development in relation to the development of the breasts.

When asking for knowledge and experiences of breast ironing, various different points and expressions were brought forth. Among these expressions were arguments and experiences where breast ironing was presented as something which was either explicitly or interpretably relating to rituals and social or cultural demands or expectations. Noteworthy is, that not all experiences involves the actual act of pressing or ‘ironing’ of the breasts, even though the ‘practices’ were brought up and referred to under the same concept – breast ironing. As aforementioned breast ironing can be understood as a means to delay or alter the process of bodily and physical transformation and hence delay such a transition. Still, some of the interviewees made references to having experienced what was termed breast ironing as part of a larger ritual. A practice used for marking the transition between two life phases.

One woman recollected how, when she was a girl, non-heated banana peels were pressed against her chest. The peels were then eaten by a young boy from the same community. This event was part of a larger event where several other girls underwent the same ritual. This ritual was considered necessary to go through for the girl to be considered a young adult.³³ However, she affirmed that this was not done with the aim of altering the function of the breasts. Instead she emphasised on it being done as a ritual, and something that had no actual physical effect on her body.

A few of the interviewees also presented their experiences as being based in a want to improve the function or appearance of their breasts. One of the most central and maybe most contradictory was the want to improve the lactation of the breasts. This had been done at different points in life for different girls and women. Some had it done several times starting when the breasts first appeared, while others experienced it in connection to them being pregnant or after the birth of their first child. They emphasised that this practice had been done for several generations and was very effective.

This is however something which points to the contradictory experiences of breast ironing. For at the same time as it is used as a means to improve the functioning of the breasts, many of the interviewees highlighted the negative effects it had had on their breasts and in particular their ability to provide their infants with breast milk. *“Well, also when I lactate now the milk doesn’t flow...”*³⁴

³³ Personal interview, Djiang, 2013

³⁴ Personal interview, Ndumbi, 2013

The conclusion that the significations of breasts are immensely strong and present in the Cameroonian society is possible to draw from these experiences. Due to the social acceptance of breasts as indicating that the girl is transitioned into adulthood and thereby becomes a sexually active being is not only used as argument for breast ironing in order to hamper or restrict the sexuality of the girl but also to decrease the risk that she is identified as just this a sexual being by others. According to the interviewees one of the largest threats for a young girl, with breasts beginning to show is that she will be identified as an adult. This in turn results in her being sexually harassed both in the home and in public, in school and other official places. She is also more likely to become sexually involved and thereby increases the risk of her becoming pregnant, something which is highly negative for the future of the young girl. Furthermore, she is more likely to be the target of rape. Thereby, breast ironing is used as a means to decrease the visibility and delay the arrival of the ultimate sign of the girl developing into an adult woman. Hence, breast ironing must in this form be understood as a means to protect the girl from the possible negative aspects of being identified as a woman.

7. Analysis

Arguably it is possible to point at three different strands of reasoning for carrying out breast ironing by looking at the experiences of the interviewees. First, it is a practice that, like other harmful practices, seeks to hamper and restrict the sexuality of girls and woman. Second, breast ironing must also, and I would argue more appropriately, be approached as a practice that seeks to protect girls and woman from perceived and actual social risks. Lastly, breast ironing also exists as a practice aiming at generating positive medical or body forming effects.

Breasts are, as repeatedly stated, understood to mean that the girl is on her way to becoming sexually active and engaging in sexual activities that in turn many put her at risk of early pregnancies and what is socially valued as unacceptable behaviour. This kind of behaviour often confers a sense of social stigmatisation on a girl and her family. Hence, when this kind of reasoning is the ground for legitimising breast ironing it has to be considered a means to hamper and restrict the sexuality of the girl and young woman. Ultimately it also teaches the girl how she is supposed to approach such issues throughout her life. This means that breast ironing can be perceived as a gendering practice that emphasises and reiterates the normative perception of what the body of a woman is and what it means. As Beauvoir (1989) argues, a body is not biologically gendered, but is gendered through discursive and social action. Breast ironing, when seeking to hamper girls'

sexuality through the suppression of their breasts, can therefore be interpreted as a means to shape the girl both physically but also psychologically. In turn then, it can be argued to be a gendering practice that seeks to shape and influence the gendered identity of the girl and later woman. This as breast ironing when being performed with the aim of altering girl's bodies, too in turn affect their sexuality is a means to shape and influence the process of shaping an identity.

However, following the experiences that have been presented it is not enough to view breast ironing as a practice that seeks to hamper girls and women's sexuality alone. Instead, the motivations most often cited lean towards an understanding that the practitioner actually seeks to protect the girl from threats that she may experience should she show signs of early breast development or signs of breast in general, this due to the significations that breasts are ascribed. These significations must in turn be acknowledged to be socially and culturally ascribed. This provides an indication of how the grounds for legitimisation of breast ironing functions. Breasts are signs of sexuality and sexual maturity, and therefore it is understood to be necessary to hamper the development of the breasts in order to protect the girl from harm.

In Cameroon the statistics show that the level of rape is relatively high, and the average age of the victims of rape is 15. This means that the group which is most commonly subjected to rape coincides with the age-group of those who experience breast ironing. Nevertheless, it should be noted that 15 years is roughly the age level at which breast ironing for protection ends. Rape according to the interviewees was common both within families and out in 'public.' One of the interviewees recollected how she had, after having her breast ironed, fled the house and sought refuge at a neighbour's house. During her first night there she was raped by the man in the house. Others also pointed to this possible negative effect of breast ironing. That if a girl flees the house she ends up in a more dangerous situation than she was in previously, one where she is without the protection of the family home.

Sexuality was depicted as a highly sensitive subject who was rarely spoken of within the family. The tradition is in fact that it is an aunt or other female adult close to the girl who speaks about such issues, rather than the mother (Abega, 2007). This relation seems though to have changed in later years due to changes in the social structures. In particular urbanisation can be thought to have a strong effect on interactions between individuals. This as the families are no longer living in proximity of each other, neither are relations between neighbours as strong as it is in a smaller community (Personal interviews, 2012-2013). They [the mothers] hide it because sometimes there is no discussion in the family about sexual education. Plus, women are the ones

supposed to take care of the children and eventually, if the girl becomes pregnant, the mother is the one to blame. Thus, the role of women is essential in not only the direct motivations for the practice but also in an indirect sense. Where the taboo surrounding sexuality has generated a need to find other ways to point towards what the young girl should protect herself. When the expression is through breast ironing it can be summarised as done by decreasing the way in which the girl is exposed to sexuality, as well as to delay her physical and mental experiences and knowledge of sexuality. Malmström (2009:223) means that “[i]mages and discourses of female sexuality may therefore always be at odds with what many women actually experience” a reflection that applies well to the Cameroonian context. Meaning that, the discourse does not correspond to the demands or the lived reality with regard to sexuality that is prevailing in the community.

Additionally, the approach to the practice per se was generally that it was rather good and a necessity to control and protect the girl. “By submitting to such norms, which women deem to be positive, women manifest their agency in practice” (Malmström, 2009:215). The practice make part of this reality in two ways, on the one hand the girl understands it as a way to protect her from this reality. On the other hand, it gives also an understanding that she has to change the way in which she carries herself and body to avoid this reality. Hence, it can be concluded that the practice in fact is part in the creation of the role of the woman as an object who has to adopt herself in order to be presentable in the context within which she exists. The arguments and motivations for breast ironing can be understood as an integral part of a performative process where norms, values and expectations of what a woman is and what she should be is reinstated in a new generation of girls and women through the practice. Thus, as a practice that challenges and reinstates the prevailing norms around women and girls bodies as well as expectations on behaviour. Breasts have, through the study been found to carry important significations for the female body, and thereby function as markers for what that body is not. This is something which arguably is reinstated and retired through the practice of breast ironing. As Bourdieu (1999) and Butler (1988; 1990; 1997) argue, bodies are defined through discursive acts in conjunction with actions that are repeated and learnt, and thereby reinstated in new subjectivities. If we understand the body as something that is not existing prior to when it is pronounced or defined, but has to be linguistically and culturally defined then it is possible to also understand how ideas of the normative body develops. Furthermore, it generates that motivations to alter and change the body to fit these normative definitions can be approached without condemnation. Within the Cameroonian society, albeit not fully, there is an idea of what a correct body for a young girl is. Burrow (2009) emphasises the influence that socially

contextual ideas of the body has. “[W]omen’s bodies are a common site of bodily encoded constraints that limit autonomy” (Burrow, 2009:130). The significations of breasts are determinants for how her body is perceived, but also explains a perceived need to make physical alterations to the same. Then there are also strong arguments to change the same body should it not conform to these expectations. Within this particular context the body should be in a specific way in order not to be defined as abnormal, and hence be target of both stigmatisation and other types of social reaction, as depicted by the interviewees.

As aforementioned, arguably the practice of breast ironing is in itself emphasising the significations of breasts by merely targeting them. However, it has to be recognised that this is not the aim or intended outcome by the practitioners. Nevertheless, by being a practice that targets breasts due to their social significations and in some instances their perceived direct effect on girls’ sexuality, it can be considered a practice that does emphasises and reiterate the significations of the breasts. The person who experiences breast ironing as well as those around her are likely to embody the negative significations of breasts. Several of the interviewees highlighted how they had been hiding their breasts in order to not show off the female bodies that they were beginning to inhabit. Furthermore, that this feeling was something which was kept inside their bodies. Hence, breast ironing needs to be approached as a performative practice as it reiterates norms and values pertaining to primarily women and girls’ breasts. But also in relation to how a girl and woman should expect their bodies to be perceived and valued. Breast ironing does arguably put the burden of protection and guilt for sexual harassment and non-consensual sex on the girl or woman, rather than on the perpetrator of these kinds of offences. The harassment towards the girl and woman is **hence fort** in the Cameroonian society. It is possible to say that it is at a level where it affects the life of women and girls. The practice does in some understandings target, albeit possibly unconsciously, the current gender disparities. This by aiming to provide the girl child with better opportunities to make her own choices and thus shape her own subjectivity and future. This means that the performative process is here visible and can be interpreted as being consciously altered by the practitioner or in some instances the girl herself.

However, the identity shaping process is also affected by the experiences of the practice and thus has an impact on the identity of the girl child. In particular the practice can be seen as having effect on the gendering of the child's identity. This by physically transmitting an understanding that the girl child and later woman are not fully acceptable in the body which she has been given. Rather she needs to alter and adapt herself to the (gendered) expectations and demands that a female

individual (as well as male individuals) must relate to. Breast ironing can hence be seen as being one part in the gender creation and hence as a gendering practice. This as it infringes on the way in which the individual perceives herself and is perceived in the society. With identity creation understood as a resulting from and contributing to reiteration of acts (Butler, 1993:22), breast ironing in the sense of altering the physical and psychological traits of the individual, can also be considered as one part in the generation of gender identity as it is "instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler, 1988:519).

“Love, trust, virginity and marriage are among the central constructs of traditional ways of being girl” (Mudaly, 2011:237). The notions of womanhood, a female role and a good girl do not necessarily echo in the way of thinking among young girls themselves. The interviewees indicated that there is a contradictory relation between ‘tradition’ and expectations from the parental generation with expectations and influences from peers as well as their own desires and wants. This will to adhere to different sets of norms has effect on the subjectivities the girls adapt and develop. While parents and particularly mothers seek to protect their children from social demands and expectations ascribed to an individual carrying a body with adult features it is possible that the child or young adolescent strives in the other direction. Thus, the idea of a strict construction and adherence to constructions of gender roles must be questioned. Arguably this is an insight into the performative process that as Butler (1998) presents it is constantly challenging norms and values. In other words, by contending that it is desirable to have children at an early age without the precondition of marriage these young women challenge and potentially destabilises the fixed gender order (Mudaly, 2011). Among the interviewees there were several instances at which they differed from their parents in ideas of what their lives should be. “Girls experience a tension between the desire for personal freedom and a strong sense of emotional responsibility to others that constantly counters the desire, [...] articulate this tension as a choice between being a good woman and being selfish” (Gilligan *et al* 1990:9 as quoted in Nayak and Kheily, 2013:5). This means then that girls through their choices are part in the constant process of reiterating and moving norms and values, in this case around sexuality and femininity.

Bawe (2011) describes the girls’ role in relation to the practice as one of naïveté, where they without reflection accept breast ironing and the fact that they are subjected to it. “While the practice is commonly performed by family members, 58% of the time by the mother, these young and naïve girls by into its reasoning and often continue inflicting the practice upon their own bodies” (Bawe, 2011:5). The argument here is that girls accept and are willing to continue breast ironing because of

a lack of better judgement. Contrary to this I would argue that there is room for a conscious acceptance and that girls who continue or begin with the practice themselves do so based on rational reasoning. This reasoning in turn is informed by contextual factors, values and realities.

Arguably, girls can be both subject and object in relation to breast ironing. On the one hand, it can be understood that girls are subjected to breast ironing and are passively being acted upon by someone else, disregarding of the actual purpose for carrying out the practice. However, when the girl instead chooses to carry out some form of breast ironing on herself, is she then passively acted upon or can it in fact be understood as a form of agency that is being embraced? When the girl chooses to carry out breast ironing herself it is not possible to conclude that it is a result of naïveté or ignorance as resented by Bawe (2011). Instead, it can be argued that by continuing or beginning the practice herself, the girl is actually taking control. That she is as McNay (2000) argues not being passively acted upon but rather as Mahmood (2005) means responds to constraining norms that are prescribed for her gendered identity. The practice of breast ironing can thus be viewed as a way of taking away self-dependency and control over the girl's body. This as the practice among other things seeks to decide over the future of the girl child. Of course her own fears and expectations also play a part, especially in cases where the herself seek to take control over the execution of breast ironing. Then however, it is rather a question of external factors in combination with a want to take control leading to this decision. Fear of the pain that breast ironing causes and thereby a choice to execute it by her own hands. An unwillingness to let others decide over one's body and an unwillingness to let others decide over her life. It is also found that girls chose to carry out the practice themselves based on an appreciation that the breasts develop too early or that it is not good to have breasts. Hence, they themselves determine that it is necessary to hinder the breasts from developing. It is however clear that the way in which the girl believes that she will be perceived in the community, if she has breasts (too early), has a strong impact on her choice. Hence, it can be argued that gendered expectations, as learnt and interpreted by the girl child, are being transformed into an embodied experience and expression. Where the girl in fact takes control over her own body and attempts to comply with the normative expectations. In turn then this is an example of what Mahmood (2005) means of how cultural ideals of gender influence and shape our bodies. This as the practice is an expression of or result of how a girl and women's body is viewed. Hence, it can be argued that a girl who chooses to carry out breast ironing, in some form, on herself has adopted and reiterates the social expectations that exists on her body and in turn her subject position. That is a girl who chooses to carry out breast ironing does

so not for her own pleasure but to adhere to the expectations that exist of a proper body, which is suitable for her age.

PART IV – CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH

Breast ironing cannot be thought of as a single phenomenon with a defined set of rules and procedures, nor an easily definable practice that gives some great insight into the motivations, understandings and experience of those involved. Instead it needs to be understood, as this thesis has attempted to do, as a concept that relates to several practices that in one way or the other refer to the alteration of women and girl's breasts. This thesis has attempted to present lived experiences of breast ironing and provide an analysis of this diverse practice in order to answer the research question; what notions of femininity are invoked in the performances of breast ironing?

This has been explored from a post-structural understanding primarily through the theoretical concept of performativity. This means, simply put, that there is a constant process of making and remaking of social phenomena, this also applies to gendered bodies and identities. This approach is necessary because given the emotive and sensitive nature of the subject a deconstruction and careful attention to the experiences of those involved is the only way to truly understand the practice.

Contrary to the UN approach, where breast ironing is considered a harmful practice, this thesis argues that this is a limiting and to some part constraining understanding. All the while the negative physical and psychological experiences many girls and women bring with them should not be disregarded it has to be acknowledged that the ultimate purpose of the practice is not to cause harm but rather the opposite. This thesis has found that breast ironing is closely intertwined with notions of femininity and female sexuality. The critical point is to be found in the various social significations that are ascribed to breasts, something that in turn evokes a perceived need to delay the development of the breasts or to alter their physical shape.

The notions of femininity that are invoked in the performances of breast ironing are plural and all emphasises the centrality of breasts in the gendering of a girl's or woman's body. It is clear that female sexuality is something that is deemed necessary to control. But at an equal level the performances of breast ironing do also indicate that the identification of breasts is the central issue. Hence, rather than being a practice that ultimately seeks to control female sexuality its practitioners attempts to decrease the signs of breasts as they in turn invoke attention to the female body. By suppressing the breasts and thereby decreasing the signs of femininity a girl is arguably then provided with the possibility to, for an extended period of time, be identified and identify herself as a child rather than as a woman. This as breasts both from an external position but also embodied by the girl and woman signifies a role as a sexual being. Hence, by suppressing the signs of female

sexuality it is thought to be possible to, depending on the practitioner's point of departure, hamper or restrict the sexuality of the girl, or to decrease the increased gendered identification of the girl as a woman.

This in turn means that breast ironing can be interpreted as a practice that through its focus on breasts reinstates and reiterates the centrality of them as a social signifier of a girl's transition into adulthood and maturity. Breast ironing is a practice that emphasises the perceived need to control female sexuality. The arguments for the practice are strongly point towards girls being hampered from playing with boys as soon as their breasts begin to show. Or rather that there is a need to make sure that the arrival of the breasts is delayed, since girls otherwise are likely to begin to like boys in other ways as merely friends. However, the practice does also pinpoint the fact that signs of female sexuality are considered necessary to hide in order to protect the woman or girl from harm. That is to protect her from threats related to sexuality, such as pregnancy or rape. Thereby not only controlling the female sexuality but also in stating that it is the girl or woman who should arrange themselves, their bodies and comportment, to the norms and values that are persisting rather than the other way around. Hence, breast ironing can be interpreted as being part of the constant reiteration and re-creation of these social boundaries.

Gender is constantly produced and reproduced at all levels of society, ranging from the interpersonal level to the global sphere. It is but one of several stratification that exists within the current world order. This means that other factors are also impinging on individuals' everyday lives. As gender, within this study, is understood as a lived process – something which is constantly changing and moving – so must also breast ironing be approached as something that moves with these changes. At the same time as it can also be understood as a practice that seeks to halt or remove these changes. Rather than defining and viewing breast ironing as a cultural ritual or practice, following my findings, I would argue that it is more appropriate to view it as dependent on external factors and as such as an expression/indication of where socially defined boundaries are to be found.

This study departs in a critical feminist post-structural theoretical framework, and as there are to my knowledge no other studies that has its departure point in a pronounced theoretical framework this is a need for more theoretically based research. Not so much to draw other conclusions around the meanings of the practice *per se*, but to add to the bulk of research and to expand the academic bulk of research.

Even though this thesis does not touch upon issues of experiences of sexuality per se it relates to female sexuality or rather how it is perceived by others rather than by women themselves. Therefore, it would of course be interesting to do a study where the focus on breast ironing is lower and where notions of sexuality are brought forth instead, and breast ironing figures merely as an indicator of what is perceived as a sexual body part. Furthermore, this study indicates that breasts signify sexuality both for girls and women, but by default also for men. However, there are no men interviewed on the matter and thereby such a study would be highly relevant to engage in. This needs to be done with the purpose of enquiring into the significations for breasts from the perspective of men, but also to be able to consider breast ironing from another entry point.

Following the same lines, it is true that this thesis has a limitation in the fact that it does not have interviews carried out with practitioners of breast ironing, other than those women and girls who have carried out breast ironing on themselves. This is of course a point where more research is needed, this in order to further deepen the understanding of the motivations and perceptions of the practice.

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