



Mini Review

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# Mitigating the Increasing Incidence and Unique Challenges of Breast Cancer in Young Women



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## Mini Review

Breast cancer is a prevalent health issue that requires urgent attention. In 2020, it accounted for about 2.3 million new cases globally, which represents about 24% of all women's cancer (Figure 1a). Despite significant medical advancements, it remains the fifth leading cause of cancer-related deaths worldwide. Although progress has been made in reducing mortality, the disease still holds a high lifetime risk of 8% - 12%. Unfortunately, the decline in breast cancer-related deaths over the past 30 years has halted and even reversed for women under 40, particularly those experiencing Breast Cancer in Young Women (BCYW), who are increasingly affected globally [1-5].

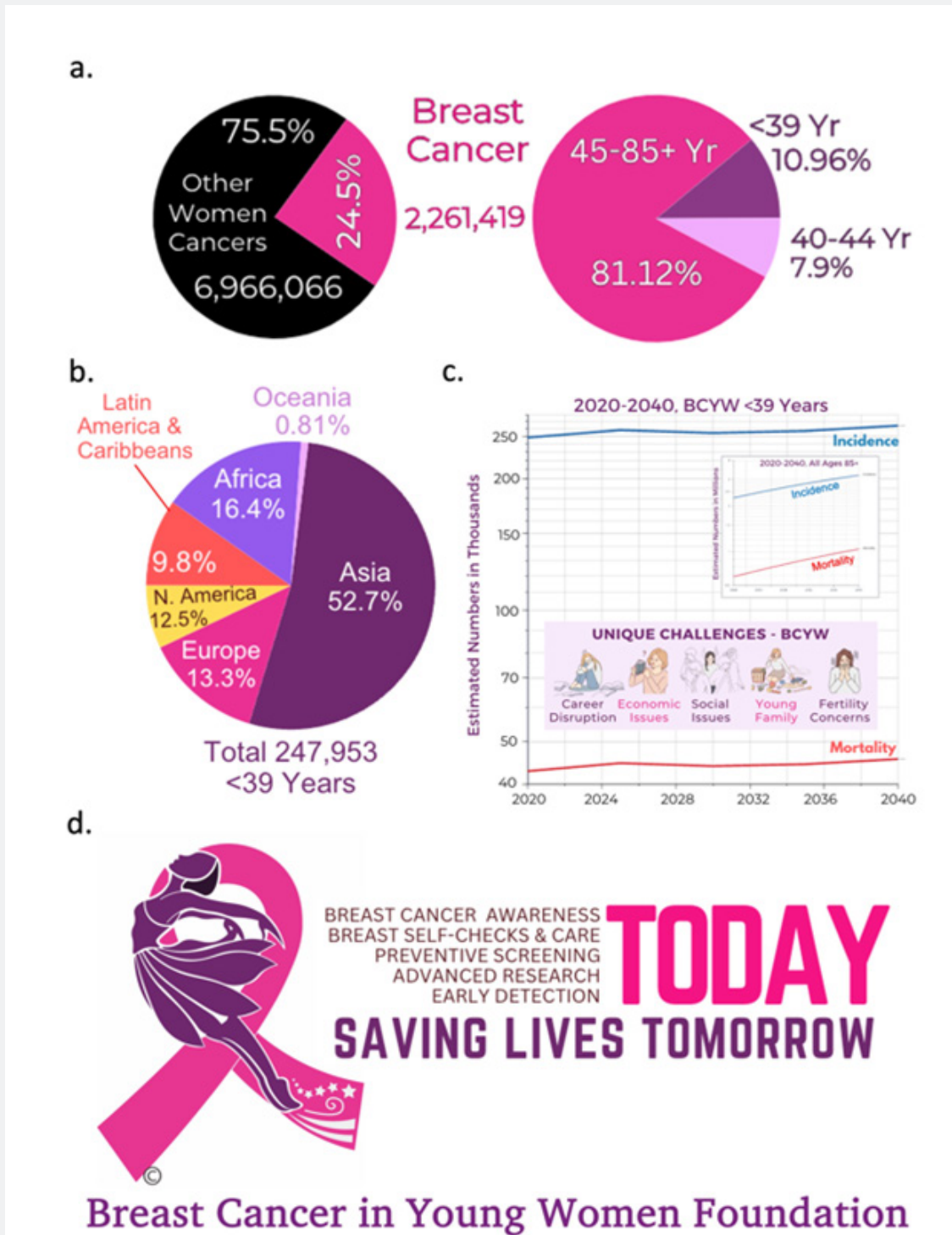
A breakdown of breast cancer cases in 2020 into three groups suggests that about 10.96% of cases were under 39, while about 7.9% were in the 40-44 age groups (Figure 1a-c). In terms of continents, Asia, followed by Africa and Europe, constitutes the highest percentage of breast cancer in young women under 39. Among younger women, breast cancer is generally perceived as an older woman's disease, leading to misconceptions about the risk for younger women. According to the World Health Organization, these numbers are expected to rise until 2040. This means that the

mean age of those who might be getting breast cancer in 2040 is likely to be relatively young right now in 2023. This underscores the point that breast cancer, once considered a disease affecting older women, is increasingly prevalent among young women <40, making awareness and achievable preventive measures much more critical than ever. We must take decisive steps to mitigate its rising incidence and tackle these women's unique challenges. The reasons behind this trend and the escalating incidence among young women remain inadequately understood, highlighting an urgent need for comprehensive, timely awareness, research, and advocacy.

Young patients face emotional turmoil, social isolation, career disruptions, financial stress, and the effects of specific treatments on their bodies and fertility. They are forced to make decisions about treatments that could impact their future, struggle with body image issues, and often face resistance from medical professionals due to their age [5-7] (Figure 1c). Unfortunately, younger patients tend to have worse prognoses due to aggressive cancer types, more advanced diagnoses, and higher risks of relapse and mortality. Moreover, young women diagnosed with breast cancer

might encounter resistance when trying to convince their doctors of their symptoms, as some medical professionals might dismiss their concerns due to their age. This further highlights the urgent

need for specialized attention and support systems tailored to the unique challenges young women dealing with breast cancer face.



**Figure 1:** Breast Cancer in Young Women. a, Prevalence of breast cancer in three age groups (i.e., >39, 40-44, and 45-85+) globally as per 2020 WHO data; b, Percent of incidences of breast cancer in young women under 39 in indicated continents per 2020 WHO data; c, Estimated number of breast cancer in young women under 39 from 2020 through 2040. Insert, estimated breast cancer in all ages from 2020-2040. Examples of unique challenges faced by younger women with breast cancer; and d, The BCYW awareness Pink-Purple Ribbon logo and the foundation message to explicitly promote awareness about increasing incidences of BCYW and their unique challenges.

## The BCYW Foundation: Advocacy for Young Women Facing Breast Cancer

Realizing that women under 40 often face unique and complex challenges in the context of breast cancer, a team of concerned colleagues decided to create a comprehensive platform to address the issues germane to young women's breast cancer. The Breast Cancer in Young Women Foundation (BCYW Foundation) was created by a group of empathetic oncologists, scientists, and advocates who were deeply moved by the poignant queries of young breast cancer patients who asked, "Why me?" [5]. The foundation is the first of its kind, specifically geared towards young women with breast cancer. It aims to provide comprehensive support to young women fighting breast cancer and to raise awareness about the unique challenges they face. The BCYW Foundation comprises a global coalition of compassionate volunteers with a resolute mission to empower young women affected by breast cancer. The team includes breast cancer experts, partners, and ambassadors from 15 countries, working with unwavering determination. They share bilingual survivor stories in six major international languages and core BCYW awareness materials in 13 international languages, leaving no stone unturned in their quest to help young women affected by breast cancer. The foundation's mission is to empower young women through advocacy, education, and community support and to raise awareness for younger women.

The BCYW Foundation has taken a bold and assertive approach to addressing the critical aspects of breast cancer in young women. Its three-fold strategy involves targeted awareness programs, robust patient survivorship support, and the urgent need for advanced research. The foundation aims to create a transformative movement by concentrating on these critical areas. It seeks to increase awareness among the targeted age group, support cutting-edge research endeavors, and enhance patient survivorship and advocacy. This effort is dedicated to saving the lives of young women with breast cancer or who might be at risk of developing breast cancer. A key focus of the foundation is to empower young women with knowledge and to advocate for the importance of breast self-examination. This empowerment equips them with the necessary tools to detect the disease early when successful treatment is most promising. The BCYW Foundation is committed to saving lives and creating a healthier future for young women by focusing on awareness, research, and patient support.

## The Pink-Purple Ribbon - Symbolizing Resilience and Unity

The Pink-Purple Ribbon is an emblem created by the BCYW Foundation. It goes beyond the traditional pink ribbon symbol and represents the unique journey of young women who are navigating the complexities of early breast cancer diagnoses [5]. The ribbon features a woman in flight against a backdrop of white waves and stars, symbolizing resilience, strength, and determination. The fusion of pink and purple hues represents

youthfulness and acknowledges these women's age-specific challenges (Figure 1d). This emblem calls society to recognize and support these individuals, advocating for their unique struggles within the broader context of breast cancer awareness.

## Continual Breast Cancer Awareness

Breast cancer is a serious issue, and it requires us to focus on various essential elements such as awareness, education, cutting-edge research, and survivorship. Understanding the significance of self-breast care, early detection, and advancing screening and treatment methods is crucial. These elements are fundamental for women's breast health, and timely awareness plays a pivotal role in this regard, which is what the BCYW Foundation upholds. The foundation advocates for breast cancer awareness throughout the year since breast cancer can strike at any moment [6,7].

Awareness campaigns must extend beyond Pink October, a single awareness month designated for breast cancer. Extending efforts beyond this period is crucial to reinforce the impact of awareness campaigns, promoting advocacy, early detection, and solidarity with patients and survivors while raising essential research funds.

Continuous advocacy initiatives are complementary to targeted campaigns and can magnify their effects. These efforts not only bridge gaps in understanding and support but also significantly affect the lives of young women battling breast cancer. Therefore, launching a year-round awareness campaign is imperative to disseminate evidence-backed information, support research priorities, and assist patients through their journey.

It is crucial to continue discussing screening, early detection, and treatment challenges beyond October. The sustained awareness effort aims to detect breast cancer as early as possible, with the goal of better understanding, preventing, and treating the disease. This commitment goes beyond a single month and aims to make every day an opportunity for breast cancer awareness, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for all those affected. In brief, Breast cancer in young women is a growing concern that demands urgent attention. We must take necessary measures to mitigate its increasing incidence and address the unique challenges faced by these women. Join the BCYW Foundation in its effort to raise awareness and fund advanced research that benefits patients. Breast cancer in young women is a pressing issue that requires immediate action. Together, the BCYW Foundation and all of us in society can make a significant impact in the fight against breast cancer in young women by raising awareness and discussing issues about breast health locally in our family and friends, vicinity, neighborhoods, social circles, etc.

## Acknowledgment

The BCYW Awareness Pink-Purple Ribbon is the Breast Cancer in Young Women Foundation logo and used to promote young women's breast cancer awareness in various forums.

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