

The Economic Case for Women's Health: Prioritizing Breast Cancer in the Philippines

Executive Summary

In the Philippines, women are the backbone of both the professional workforce and the informal "care economy." However, breast cancer remains the leading cause of cancer-related mortality among Filipino women, often striking during their prime productive years. Notably, the incidence of breast cancer among young women (≤ 40 years) is higher in the Philippines than in other Asian countries.¹ Positioning breast cancer as a national priority is a vital economic strategy to safeguard human capital and national productivity.¹

1. The ROI of the "Female Economy"

- **Significant Value of Lost Welfare (VLW):** The global VLW (*which quantifies both market losses (e.g., lost income of patient and caregiver) and non-market losses (e.g., value of health status, leisure time)*; estimated from 2021 Global Burden of Disease data and World Bank indicators) due to breast cancer has reached approximately 2,500 billion US dollars, accounting for 1.65% of global GDP in 2021. Focusing on the model estimates for the Philippines, the VLW due to breast cancer is 19 billion USD (about 1.1 trillion pesos), or 1.9% of the GDP.²
- **The Entrepreneurial Engine:** Building on a consistent trend since 2006, the 2014 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor report highlights the dominant role of Filipino women in driving the nation's economy, noting they comprise the majority of both early-stage entrepreneurs (58%) and established business owners (55%)³.
- **Workforce Productivity and Premature Mortality:** Breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer-related mortality in the Philippines, with 33,079 new cases annually⁴. This health crisis creates a significant economic "impact gap," as 50% to 60% of these deaths are classified as premature, occurring while women are at the peak of their professional careers.⁵
- **Preventing Poverty Escalation:** Approximately 70%⁶ of Filipino cancer patients experience "financial catastrophe", often pushing middle-income families below the poverty line. This financial vulnerability is fundamentally rooted in a widening innovation gap. When women are denied timely access to modern, targeted therapies, they are often left to rely on older, conventional treatments that may yield sub-optimal clinical outcomes.

¹ Yap et. al. [Young Filipino breast cancer patients have worse survival outcomes](#). ECancer. 2023.

² Mao et al. [Estimates and projections of the global economic cost of breast cancers from 2021 to 2050 - PMC](#). 2025

³ Bhoola. [Investing in Women Philippines Country Context Paper](#).

⁴ Globocan. Philippine Fact Sheet. 2022.

⁵ Espina. ['High rate' of premature cancer deaths in PH alarming --- gov't think tank](#). Manila Bulletin. 2023

⁶ Ngelangel. [Philippine Costs in Oncology \(PESO\): Describing the economic impact of cancer on Filipino cancer patients using the ASEAN costs in oncology study dataset](#). 2018.

Because out-of-pocket (OOP) spending - which remains the primary financing mechanism for healthcare, accounting for nearly 42% of total health expenditures⁷ - the financial burden of managing cancer care falls heavily on the patients themselves. For the female entrepreneurs who anchor the economy, a single cancer diagnosis can mean liquidating business assets or depleting life savings to cover these costs, effectively reversing years of economic progress.

2. Bridging the "Innovation Gap"

To realize the economic benefits of a healthy workforce, it will be important for the government and stakeholders to work together to address the inefficiencies preventing access to standard of care.

- **The Formulary Bottleneck:** Inclusion in the Philippine National Formulary (PNF) is the prerequisite for government procurement and reimbursement, which serves as a critical enabler for universal health care coverage. While there are over 19,000 FDA-registered medicines, only 676 (3.5%) are currently listed in the PNF⁸. Strengthening and streamlining the Health Technology Assessment (HTA) assessment pathway could help ensure that patients benefit from timely access to proven therapies. At present, the assessment process takes two⁹ to nine¹⁰ years, delaying access to life-saving medicines. As a result, patients face poorer health outcomes and longer absences from the workforce. For example, several targeted breast cancer therapies hold Category 1 recommendations from the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN), yet remain excluded from the PNF.
- **Optimizing the PhilHealth Z-Benefit Package for Breast Cancer:** The increase of the Z-Benefit package to PHP 1.4 million is a vital step. Further opportunities exist to maximize this investment by expanding coverage to include innovative therapies and treatment delivered in the outpatient setting, many of which are already reimbursed in other ASEAN countries. Access to such innovative therapies is essential for preventing disease progression and keeping women in the workforce.
- **Closing the Data Deficit:** The Philippines does not have a national population-based cancer registry, and instead relies on data from smaller registries to monitor and evaluate programmes on cancer prevention, detection and control, which have extremely limited coverage.¹¹

⁷ ThinkWell. [Oncology Financing in the Philippines](#). 2021

⁸ WHO. [How Pharmaceutical Systems are Organized in Asia and the Pacific](#). 2018.

⁹ The HTA Council formally started its topic nomination process in 2022, and topics remain pending

¹⁰ The former Formulary Executive Council (FEC) endorsed newly received applications from 2018 as well as those still pending since 2016, remains unresolved.

¹¹ Economist Impact. [Impact and opportunity: the case for investing in women's cancers in Asia Pacific](#). 2023

3. Strategic Recommendations: A Roadmap for Economic Resilience

The government can turn this burden into an opportunity through three targeted interventions designed to maximize economic resilience.

- **Accelerated HTAC Review:** Grant "accelerated assessment" status to innovative breast cancer therapies to prevent the high mortality rates associated with delayed access to standard-of-care.
- **Sustainable Funding & Financial Protection:** Expand **PhilHealth Z-Benefit breast cancer package** to include innovative and curative medicines. This ensures that patients do not default to less effective treatments due to cost, preserving their ability to return to the workforce.
- **Digitalization for Accountability** (National Registries): Harmonize existing institutional-based registries and explore the implementation of a population-based digital patient registries to track screening uptake, patient outcomes, and treatment adherence. This data is crucial for measuring the economic efficiency of health investments.