Chapter 13

IMPACT OF CULTURE, EDUCATION AND
SOCIO–ECONOMIC STATUS

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Culture is the melting pot, which shapes living relationships between individuals, peoples and countries. It opens our minds to riches other than our own, and offers us a door to a new vision of the world. I am convinced we are enhanced by the gaze of others.

From Dominique de Villepin, Indo French Waltz, August 1, 2002,
In http://meadev.nic.in/govt/dominii_france-toi01aug.htm

Breast cancer exacts a tremendous toll on the global society. One of the commonest cancers in women, with more than half of the cases in developing nations, it remains a leading cause of cancer related death. Significant variation depending on geographic location has been observed, and an increase in incident breast cancer cases has been noted internationally over the past 40 years. Studies in geographic pathology, for instance, show that incidence rates are generally highest in North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand. They are intermediate in Southern and Eastern European and South American countries, and lowest in Asia and Africa. In addition to the devastating effects on patients and their families, the economic costs of breast cancer are still enormous, both in terms of direct medical-care resources and in the loss of human life. (1–6).

In the year 2000, approximately 1,050,000 breast cases were reported around the world with 375,000 deaths. In developed countries the average incidence is 95 per 100,000 and in less developed countries it averaged at 20 per 100,000 population (3-6). Roughly 174,000 (17%) deaths in industrialized nations and 140,000 (12%) in developing countries per year are from breast cancer (3-4). Nonetheless, despite an increase in cancer detection and prevention efforts around the world, due to its growing
prevalence in the international context, and the increasing numbers of incident cases in developing nations, breast cancer remains a global public health problem (also, see Chapter 1 in this book). It is also a growing problem in women of African descent. (1-4), (7-12).

Women of African descent represent a socially, economically, culturally, and ethnically diverse group and breast cancer is less common among them than in the other population groups. Nonetheless, breast cancer incidence and mortality rates are rising in these populations, with changes usually more marked in younger women (i.e. >50 years of age). Today, breast cancer is also the leading cause of cancer related death in women of African descent. In 2003 age-adjusted incidence rates in African-American women in the United States were (123.7 per 100,000). In white women, rates in South Africa of 70.2 per 100,000 are comparable to rates from other developed country populations, such as the United Kingdom (56.1 per 100,000) or the United States (140.9 per 100,000). The age-standardized rates of 11.3 per 100,000 compare well with rates from central Africa (Harare age-standardized rate, 20.4 per 100,000, Kampala, 16.4 per 100,000). Breast cancer is even rarer in the Gambia (3.4 per 100,000), and in Kenya (1.08 per 100,000) (4), (7-12).

While there is significant variation in patterns of incidence; there are also several important shared characteristics. These include: an increase incident cases in young women, lifestyle factors such as low SES, an aggressive histology, delay, presentation with advanced stage disease, poor diet, obesity, decreased survival time rates, lack of access to adequate medical care, and cultural beliefs and expectations that influence breast cancer decision making and prevention.

In what follows, we review the relevance of culture, and lifestyle factors such as educational and socio-economic (SES) as context effects that impact the experience of breast cancer in women of African descent. Context effects are bi-directional. They can be positive and beneficial or negative and adverse (13-20). In the first section, we explore the relevance of culture as a context effect that moulds individual and social beliefs, expectations, experiences and responses to breast cancer. We also address cultural variation in truth telling, and disclosure. In the second section, we further highlight the significance of context in terms of lifestyle factors such as education and socio-economic status (SES). Finally, we summarize our findings.