

Stigma undermines progress on AIDS

Maputo, Sunday

IN A busy Mozambique clinic, a 25-year-old mother says she won't tell her estranged husband she has HIV for fear she will be blamed and beaten.

"Very often here women won't tell their partners or ex-partners that they're HIV-infected," said Sifronia Filipe, an educator at the clinic where the mom is being treated for AIDS.

"She is scared he will leave her or will tell the

neighborhood and the neighbors will discriminate against her." It's a scene oft repeated across sub-Saharan Africa, where young women account for a quarter of new HIV infections and where AIDS remains a devastating scourge.

The problem is especially acute in southern nations like Mozambique, where 7 percent of all teenage girls are HIV positive. That number doubles to 15 percent by age 25, according to a report by the Joint United Nations Pro-

gram on HIV/AIDS released last week.

Protecting young mothers will be critical if the world is to meet a UN target of eliminating new HIV infections among children by 2015.

At an international AIDS meeting that started in Melbourne yesterday, public figures from Burmese political activist Aung San Suu Kyi to Virgin Group founder Richard Branson will lead a call to fight stigma and discrimination, which has blighted prog-

ress in poorer nations.

"Some people, if they find out they're HIV-positive, they will change hospitals or scratch out their test result on their medical records," said Aleny Couto, head of the HIV program with the Mozambique government's Ministry of Health.

"We still have stigma in this country, which is still a very big obstacle." It's been three decades since AIDS began ravaging populations around the globe.

While new infections have fallen to the lowest level this century and AIDS-related deaths are at a seven-year low, a "youth bulge" experienced by many countries with the highest HIV prevalence means that the number of young people living with HIV or at risk of becoming infected will increase in the next five years, the New York-based Population Council said last week.

More than two out of three of the 35 million people living

with HIV are in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the report by UNAIDS. The 86-page document lists human rights violations, stigma and discrimination as the No. 1 reasons why people with HIV are being left behind.

A so-called Melbourne Declaration prepared for this week's meeting affirms that stigma and discrimination "have no place in any effective response to HIV," said Francoise Barre-Sinoussi, the conference's co-chair, who

was awarded a Nobel prize in 2008 for discovering HIV.

As the meeting opened yesterday, Barre-Sinoussi invited dozens of representatives of HIV research and advocacy groups to the stage as she paid her respects to the passengers and crew who died on board flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. Former International AIDS Society President Joep Lange and his partner, Jacqueline van Tongeren, were among the dead.