

14,000 AIDS orphans in Malaysia

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PETALING JAYA: There are about 14,000 AIDS orphaned children in Malaysia, according to a recent United Nations study.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said the council did not have an actual count of the number of children involved but considered the UN figure as "not a bad count."

"It is not a bad count considering that Malaysia has around 44,000 HIV/AIDS cases.

"The UN defines AIDS orphans as those children whose mothers have died of AIDS/HIV-related infections and diseases.

"This is because when a woman becomes infected with HIV, she still tries to ensure that her children are taken care of and protected -sometimes even to the point of fore-

going treatment so that she can use the money set aside for medicine to buy food and provisions for her children," she said in a talk on *HIV/AIDS in Malaysia: Are We Doing Enough?* at St Paul's Anglican Church here yesterday.

Marina pointed out that women had less access to treatment, possibly because of their reluctance to be admitted to hospitals.

"This is because they may not have anyone else to take care of their children while they are undergoing medical treatment. We found that women often did not want to go for treatment because of larger considerations.

"The same, however, did not apply to men and fathers infected with HIV/AIDS. Infected men tend to concentrate on trying to get better," she added.

The number of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS had

risen threefold in the last six years to reach an all-time high of 13.4 million worldwide.

India, which has 1.2 million AIDS orphans, is the country with the highest infection.

Malaysia recorded an increase of 6,000 HIV/AIDS cases last year, the highest recorded so far.

Marina said women whose husbands had died of HIV/AIDS-related diseases would turn to being sex workers because of their lack of training and skills in getting jobs to support their children.

"This will expose them to a

higher risk of being infected with the HIV/AIDS virus," she added.

Marina said gender stereotyping of roles among men and women also made them more vulnerable to being infected with the virus.

"Women, especially those considered to be of a lower status by their community, are not given the right information about the virus because the community thinks they should not know about them.

"They may also not get to decide when and whom they

should marry, or when they should start having children.

"Young boys are vulnerable because parents don't talk to their sons about their bodies, expecting them to know about such things. Boys are also expected to act macho and they come under a lot of intense peer pressure," she said.

Marina urged religious bodies to help combat the stigma and discrimination faced by HIV/AIDS patients, who faced the fear of being branded drug users and prostitutes, and made it difficult for them to seek treatment.