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Pakistan nuns' center shows way to a better life

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Wazira Mariam (extreme right) teaching girls sewing skills

LAHORE, Pakistan -- A sewing center run by Daughters of the Cross nuns has for the past 20 years been helping illiterate slum dwellers gain the skills to support their families.

"We started crochet classes in the compound of a local Christian's house," said Wazira Mariam, the oldest teacher of St. Anne's Gharelu (household) center, now located in Lahore's St. Francis parish. "There was no roof" and classes were conducted that way for three years, she recalled.

Most of the men in the slums are unemployed and the women work as house maids.

"We are trying to help the children from broken families and those who don't go to schools. The skills can help them earn a respectable living," said Sister Shamim Tariq, supervisor of the center.

Mariam says in the early days the nuns went door-to-door to persuade women of the value of learning sewing skills.

"We visited houses and urged both house maids and their children, wandering in the streets, to learn sewing. We showed them it was a way to an extra source of income and a respectable living," she said.

German Sister Anna Xaveria started the center in 1989. "She first conducted a survey of the area and taught poor Christians about hygiene and the importance of education or learning a skill" Mariam said. "Everybody used to call her baji (elder sister)."

Sister Xaveria died in Lahore in 2005 at the age of 71.

Now 40 students, including six Muslims, attend the sewing classes in the double-story building. The one-year course also teaches skills such as painting, knitting and recycling. Students pay 100 rupees (US$1.19) a month.

The staff of two nuns and two laywomen teach the teenage girls how to produce sweaters, caps, cushion covers, flower pots and priests' stoles.

Naseem Bibi, one of the center's past students, now runs her own sewing center and a beauty parlor. "Customers see our sewing machines and they make their orders," she said, adding that she is able to make a comfortable living, thanks to the skills she learnt at the center.

The center, however, is struggling financially.

"We don't have enough wool for teaching purposes," Sister Tariq says. She said the center's monthly income of 2,000 rupees from fees only goes to pay electricity bills and wages.

The center's 20th anniversary celebrations also had to be canceled because of security concerns in violence-plagued Pakistan.

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