



PHOTO & CAPTION

Lessons That Save Lives



Photo: USAID/Ritu Upadhyay

Chandini concentrates on getting a petticoat sewn straight in her tailoring class.

Fourteen year-old Chandini lives in a slum in New Delhi, India, with her mother and four siblings. Every morning she and her brother and sisters wake up before sunrise and comb the streets picking up garbage that they can sell to a recycler. She hardly earns more than 5 rupees — 11 cents — a day.

But in the afternoon, she comes to the YWCA, a USAID-funded community center that she calls her safe haven.

Women and girls in Chandini's community are extremely vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS. Young girls walk the streets alone, often falling prey to sexual abuse. Poor families marry off their young daughters to relieve the financial burden of raising them. But their husbands are often alcoholics with multiple partners. Desperate to feed their families and survive, some turn to prostitution.

HIV/AIDS is spreading at an alarming rate in India. More than 5 million people are infected — a national epidemic second in size only to South Africa. Once confined largely to men, the disease's prevalence is now growing rapidly among women. Young girls are often the most vulnerable because social norms and poverty prevent them from learning how to avoid infection.

At Chandini's YWCA, girls learn important life skills such as how to take care of their bodies and protect themselves from contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted infections. The center also offers vocational training classes that teach the teens how to earn money. Chandini is enrolled in a year-long cutting and tailoring course. Sewing a pink petticoat, she says, "If I do this right, hopefully I can sell this piece and make some money." Her friend Hamida has already started up a small business selling petticoats for 15 rupees each.

For Chandini and Hamida, these life-saving lessons have given them hope for a future.