

Usman, Pakistan

Usman, 16, lives in Sialkot. This city has made significant progress during the last few decades. It is one of the most important industrial cities in Pakistan. Sports goods, surgical instruments, musical instruments, and leather garments are manufactured in Sialkot and exported all over the world. The literacy rate in Sialkot is the highest in Pakistan and the per capita income is almost double the national per capita income. Sialkot is also the birth place of Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, commonly known as Allama Iqbal, who was a famous Persian- and Urdu-language poet. In a milieu where memorizing verse was customary, his poetry became widely known even among the illiterate.



Usman, 16, Children's World Congress on Child Labor and Education, New Delhi, India, September 4-8, 2005

Usman is the oldest of six children in the family. He has two brothers, who are 5- and 6-years-old, and three sisters, who are 7-, 11- and 14-years-old. Usman's father is a carpenter and his mother is a housewife in Pasrur, a small town outside of Sialkot. Usman's mother and father completed five and six years of school, respectively.

Usman went to school through grade five, when, like many kids in his neighborhood, he had to discontinue his studies in order to work. At age nine, he left home in Pasrur, to live with his *Mamu* (maternal uncle) in the big industrial city of Sialkot some 9 miles away. Usman did not want to work, but his parents convinced him to go. Even so, he was grateful to his uncle for bringing him to Sialkot and for getting him a job in the same manufacturing unit where he worked. Usman felt that his uncle was kind as he did not charge him anything for food or housing out of love for his sister's family.

Usman worked in the surgical instrument factory for 3 years. After one year, he became a *Shagird* (apprentice). He cried several times, because he could not go to school. His job was to grind scissors, cutters, and a host of other surgical instruments on a machine. These instruments are used in hospitals all over the world. He worked with about 15 boys, who were between 6 and 18 year of age.

Usman worked seven hours a day, six days a week in the factory. He earned 600 Pakistani rupees (\$10 US dollars) a month. Usman gave the money he earned to his parents. Usman wondered why he was paid less than the adult men. He desired to work in decent working conditions with fair wages and benefits.

Usman experienced injury several times while grinding, sharpening and polishing the edges of instruments for long hours on the grinding machine. Getting cuts and bruises at work was common. "The work environment was very noisy and factory dust spreads

everywhere," he said. Moreover, Usman did not like working so many hours as he had not time to study.

Usman thinks that the contractor, for whom he worked, was a nice and kindhearted man. He provided a doctor when there was an injury to preclude the work from stopping. Usman also remembers him fondly for paying him more on special occasions, like the Festival of Id. Usman used to really look forward to the weekends when he was able to go and meet his parents, brothers and sisters. On many of these occasions, he considered not returning to Sialkot to work.

Subsequently, a local non-governmental organization Buniyad Literacy Community Council (BLCC) discovered that Usman had been forced to discontinue his studies in order to work in an extremely hazardous manufacturing unit when he was less than 14 years old. Initially, Usman received *non*-formal education two hours a day in a school that was jointly run by BLCC and the Government Sialkot Industry Association.

When Usman was 13-years-old, he stopped working and began attending school *full*-time school. The school was managed by the ILO-International Child Labor Elimination Program and funded by the US Department of Labor. He is happy that the school provides free books and he does not have to pay an entrance fee. He is very happy to be back in school like other children. Usman has now completed seven years of education. He is in the eighth grade.

Usman recalls his parents thinking that they were poor and that he, being the oldest child in the family, needed to drop out of school to begin work at a young age. His parents were burdened with the reality of feeding six children and were constantly concerned about the marriage of their daughters. His father works as a carpenter and is the sole bread-earner for the family of eight. Usman thinks that his father pulled him out of school early, because of a lack of awareness and a cultural perspective that does not attach a premium to education. He confessed that when he stopped working, his father was able to support the whole household on his solitary income. Of course, he works much harder now.

Today, Usman's parents want him to study. His father is now convinced that Usman can complete his education and will get decent work, which will enable their family to lead a life of dignity and respect.

Usman recognizes the value of education and wants to complete his Masters degree. He now feels that his dreams will come true. Ironically, he wants to be the owner of a surgical factory, or a businessman. "However, there will be no child labor in my factory," he said.

Usman does not want small children to work and grow up to be unskilled low-wage earners all their lives. He would like to initiate a non-governmental organization and dedicate his life to mobilizing efforts to provide free, quality and meaningful education for all children so that they can become productive assets to his country. "The best way to

help child laborers is to provide more education about human rights, especially children's rights, and to allow NGOs to help," Usman said. "Education is the most important thing for children," he said. Usman already feels that he is a child rights activist. However, he thinks that he will become an even better activist after getting quality education.

Usman is sad that his sisters are unable to attend school. He thinks that maybe one day the social-political situation in Pakistan will change and it will become obligatory for parents to send girls to school. Communities and the government will do all they can to create the necessary pre-conditions to render school attendance for girls safe, secure and fun. Usman is committed to working toward this day.

To realize his aspirations, Usman thinks that he will need to continue his education. Through education, he can overcome poverty and support his aging parents and younger brothers and sisters. He invites everyone to join hands with him in this task.