

# 2009 Frederick Douglass Award Winner

## Veero | Pakistan



### Frederick Douglass Award

is given to an individual who has survived slavery and is using their life in freedom to help others. The award honors the

tremendous resilience of the human spirit, and emphasizes that many survivors of modern-day slavery go on to help others to freedom. Named after an escaped slave who became an influential author, diplomat and abolitionist, and helped persuade President Lincoln to end American slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation.

**Pakistan is a land of fear for more than a million slaves. They're forced to work-off bogus debts at farms, factories and brickyards. Slaveholders use brutal tactics to keep them frightened. Veero remembers the terror.**



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### From Fear to Fearlessness

"The slaveholder hired men armed with guns and axes, and they guarded us the entire day," Veero recalls. "They would fire their guns into the air at night to terrorize us so we wouldn't try to escape."

A local farmer cheated Veero's family, by claiming a debt had never been repaid. Then, came the unthinkable. The farmer demanded more than money.

This was Veero's defining moment. With the safety of her children at stake, she took a terrifying risk. Alone and on foot, she quietly slipped away from the farm and walked to the nearest town. She staged a three-day sit-in at a police station to demand that authorities take action.

Veero's daring escape worked. Police freed her entire family.

### A Different Kind of Freedom Fighter

Debt bondage slavery is illegal in Pakistan, but illiterate villagers don't know how to stand up for their rights. Veero shows them how. First, she helps slaves overcome fear. Then, just as she had done to free her own family, Veero walks slaves to police stations to begin the legal process.

"It would have been impossible for me without Veero," says former slave Chandar Sabahi. "I didn't know the first step to get away from that farm. It was Veero who helped me get free."

Veero never learned to read or write. But she has earned the trust of local slaves, and she's respected by police and community organizations.

"She's brave, she's intelligent and she's kind," says Ghulam Hyder of the Green Rural Development Organization, a group that has been fighting slavery in rural Pakistan. "I think she's a hero."



However, the work Veero does is dangerous. Slaveholders aren't happy that she has helped 700 slaves break free.

"The slaveholders have sent messages that I will be murdered. But I don't fear them anymore," Veero says. "All people are equal, and I want to free others so they do not suffer what I have suffered. That is the spirit I have inside me."

### **A Future of Freedom**

Veero lives a simple life and still works on farms to earn a living. But now, she's a free woman and gets paid for her work. She says one of the best benefits of freedom is "happiness."

"Our life has totally changed now, we have a social life, we can meet other people and talk to each other," Veero says. This was impossible in slave camps where men were kept in leg irons and women were guarded by thugs.

Veero's triumphant escape from slavery has inspired others to believe that freedom is worth the risk. She has formed a small foundation to free slaves. It's called the Saath Saharoo Society, which means "Help Together."

"I believe the time will come when all slaves will be free," Veero says, "and I am fighting for them."