



Indian State of Odisha Opens First Women's Land Rights Center

Ganjam, Odisha, India- Today, March 8, 2011, on the one hundredth anniversary of international women's day, the Indian state of Odisha opened its first Women's Land Rights Facilitation Centre. The centre, created by the local government, will help poor women obtain legal rights to land, to allow them to provide for their families and pull themselves out of poverty.

"This is clearly a historic moment for Ganjam," said Srimati V. Sugyani Devi, a Member of the Legislative Assembly, Kabisurya Nagar, Ganjam.

Ganjam district has a total population of 3 million, and is overwhelmingly rural. Most women in the region are illiterate and about one in three work as agricultural laborers. Many function as the head of their household for part of the year, because large numbers from men from Ganjam travel to other states looking for work for most of the year. In addition, there are a large number of single women in Ganjam. Some are widows, others deserted by their husbands, and still others were never able to marry because their parents were too poor to afford to pay the dowry required for marriage.

There are approximately 7,000 families without homesteads in the area around the new centre. Families like Mamata China's. China, a 30-year-old mother of four children, lives on a small piece of land to which she has no legal right.

"I want... this center to help me get the title so that we can till our own land and lead a respectful life," said China.

The Centre will do just that. Created by the state government of Odisha and local officials, the Centre will cater to the needs of these families by ensuring that they benefit from the state's anti-poverty programming, and guarantee that the titles provided to families include both the husband and wife's name or just the woman's name in women-headed households. The Rural Development Institute (Landesa's partner in India) will help as a supporting partner of the local government.

The Centre has three major objectives: 1) to identify and serve eligible women 2) raise awareness and build capacity among potential beneficiaries and local government officials 3) to provide a forum for addressing women's land-related grievances and disputes. The staff of the Centre, along with specially trained youth, will identify homestead-less women, assist them in applying for land, and ensure that their cases are prioritized.

The Centre will champion the rights of women and help sensitize government officials to the women's plight. It will also educate women in the community about their land rights and entitlements. Government offices can sometimes feel like a hopeless maze to uneducated and poor women, said Pushpanjali Behera, who will staff the new center. "This center...will guide the women who come...for help," said Behera. The Centre's mere opening has already raised hopes and expectations in the community.

"I have a small house site but have to eke out a living as an agricultural labourer," said Sundari Jani, a 50-year-old widow. "I hope this centre will help me get my own piece of agricultural land which I can till and [use] to sustain myself."