

Land Rights for Women in Tribal Odisha — The Foundation Everything Else Stands On

The Landesa-supported pilot programme in Odisha, which worked with the Government of Odisha to provide land rights to vulnerable landless women, demonstrated this practically — and produced learning about what institutional and policy reform is required to make women's land right...

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practice-note

Women Empowerment

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The Legal Framework: What Women Are Entitled To

National provisions

Hindu Succession Act (as amended 2005): Daughters have equal rights to ancestral agricultural land as sons. Prior to 2005, daughters were excluded from agricultural land inheritance in most Indian states. The 2005 amendment corrected this. For tribal communities covered by specific customary law systems, the application of the HSA is complex — but the general direction of national law is toward equal inheritance rights.

Forest Rights Act 2006: IFR (Individual Forest Rights) titles are to be issued jointly in the names of both husband and wife where land is being settled with a household. FRA Rule 12A explicitly requires that in any title issued under the FRA, both spouses be named. Single women and widows are entitled to IFR titles in their own names.

PMAY-G (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana — Gramin): The housing scheme explicitly requires that the title to the constructed house be in the woman's name, or jointly in both spouses' names. This is a central scheme condition — not optional — and its implementation in Odisha has been patchy, with many titles issued in men's names despite the requirement.

Odisha-specific provisions

The Government of Odisha has directed, through administrative circulars since 1987 (letter no. 48425 dated 19th August 1987), that all government wasteland, house sites, and ceiling surplus lands being distributed to landless persons should be issued with **joint patta** in the names of both husband and wife. This is a longstanding state policy that is widely ignored in practice.

The Social Innovations Journal's 2024 study on land rights and empowerment of tribal women in Odisha found that despite these provisions, the gap between policy and implementation remains enormous — women hold land titles far less frequently than the legal framework requires.

The Implementation Gap: Why Women Don't Hold Land Titles

Understanding why the gap exists guides what NGOs can do about it.

Revenue officials don't know the rules. Many taluk and block-level revenue officials are genuinely unaware that joint patta is required for government land settlements, or that FRA titles must include women's names. This is not always bad faith — it is a training and awareness failure at the implementation level.

Women don't know their rights. Most tribal women in Odisha do not know that they are legally entitled to joint patta when government land is settled with their households, or that their name must appear on an FRA title. What you don't know you're entitled to, you cannot claim.

Community norms treat land as male domain. In many tribal communities, the cultural understanding is that land belongs to men — it is managed by men, passed down through male lines, and registered in men's names as a matter of course. Women who assert their right to joint registration challenge these norms and may face resistance from within their own households.

FRC composition excludes women. Forest Rights Committees — the community institution that processes FRA claims — are frequently dominated by men. Women who have limited participation in FRCs are less likely to have their names included in claims. The IJNRD 2023 study of tribal women's FRA rights found that women's inadequate representation in FRCs was a primary reason for their exclusion from IFR titles.

Documentation challenges. Revenue records in Odisha are inconsistently maintained and sometimes contested. A woman who has always farmed a particular piece of land alongside her husband may have difficulty establishing her claim to joint registration if the original settlement was in her husband's name.

The Evidence on What Women's Land Ownership Changes

The global and India-specific evidence on the outcomes of women's land ownership is strong and consistent:

Reduced intimate partner violence. Multiple studies across South Asia find that women who own land experience lower rates of domestic violence and have greater capacity to leave violent situations. Land ownership gives women a credible alternative to remaining — both practically (somewhere to go) and socially (negotiating leverage within the marriage).

Greater household investment in children's education and nutrition. Research in India and globally finds that when women control land assets, more household

income goes to children's education, healthcare, and nutrition than when equivalent assets are controlled by men. The channel appears to be women's stronger preference for investing in children's wellbeing.

Improved access to credit. Land title is the primary collateral for formal agricultural credit. Women who own land can borrow in their own name — a capacity that SHG credit partially substitutes for but does not fully replace. A woman with a land title can access Kisan Credit Card, agricultural term loans, and MUDRA credit in ways that are difficult without title.

Stronger bargaining position. Within the household, a woman who holds land title has a recognized economic contribution and a legal claim that gives her leverage in household decision-making. The Odisha-specific research in Kandhamal and Mayurbhanj documented this empowerment effect among women who held land titles.

What NGOs Can Do: Five Specific Interventions

Intervention 1: Awareness for women

Before anything else, ensure that women in communities you work in know what they are entitled to. Not through a general "women's rights" session — through specific, practical information:

- You are entitled to have your name on the FRA title for land your household farms in the forest
- You are entitled to joint patta if the government is settling wasteland or house site land with your household
- Your house under PMAY-G must be titled in your name or jointly — not only in your husband's name
- If your husband dies, your right to the land does not extinguish — you are entitled to inherit it

Deliver this information in the tribal language. Printed reference cards in local languages help, but oral delivery in community meetings is more effective for communities with low literacy.

Intervention 2: FRC composition and women's participation

Forest Rights Committees process FRA claims at the community level. If the FRC in your operational community has few women members, or if women members are present but not active, their names will not appear on IFR claims.

Practical facilitation:

- At the next gram sabha meeting, raise the FRC's composition: are there sufficient women members? Are women members active?
- If reconstitution is needed, facilitate gram sabha election of women FRC members — including women who are not wives of existing male members
- At FRC meetings, ensure women members are asked specifically to confirm which households should be listed on each claim and which names should be included

For single women (widows, divorced women, unmarried women over 18) — a particularly vulnerable group who are systematically excluded from FRA claims — the gram sabha needs to actively identify them and ensure their claims are filed separately in their own names.

Intervention 3: Revenue official engagement

The joint patta provision in Odisha's administrative circulars requires revenue officials to issue joint titles. Most don't — either from ignorance or from the path of least resistance (issuing in one name is simpler).

Approach:

- Identify the relevant revenue official (Tahasildar for agricultural land settlements; block-level officer for PMAY-G titles)

- Request a meeting — as an NGO working in the district — to understand the current process for land title issuance and to share the relevant provisions
- Present the specific circulars requiring joint patta and FRA rules requiring women's names
- Ask how the NGO can support compliance — by helping prepare documentation, by facilitating community awareness, by flagging gaps

This is an advocacy-as-partnership approach. You are not threatening or confrontational. You are bringing information, establishing a relationship, and positioning yourself as a resource. Revenue officials who are genuinely unaware of the joint patta requirement typically respond positively.

Intervention 4: Title verification and correction

In communities where land titles have already been issued, audit the situation: how many women's names appear on household land titles? How many FRA titles include both spouses? How many PMAY-G houses are titled only in men's names?

Where titles have been incorrectly issued — omitting women's names where they should appear — the correction process exists. For FRA IFR titles, the Gram Sabha can pass a resolution requesting correction and submit it to the SDLC. For PMAY-G titles, a complaint to the block Development Officer is the starting point.

This correction work is slow and bureaucratically laborious. It requires persistence. It is also uniquely valuable, because existing incorrect titles represent women's rights that have already been formally denied and need to be reclaimed — not new rights being asserted for the first time.

Intervention 5: Documentation for single women

Single women — widows, divorced or separated women, unmarried women heads of household — are the most vulnerable category for land rights in tribal Odisha. They are typically not covered by any titling that happened through their husband's household. They often lack the documentation needed to make independent land

claims (caste certificate, income certificate, residence proof).

Specific facilitation for single women:

- Map single women in each community you work in — how many are there? Do any of them cultivate land? Is that land titled?
- Support them to obtain the documentation needed for an FRA claim or government land allocation
- Facilitate gram sabha recognition of their cultivation history and support for their claims
- Connect them with the district-level revenue office's Bhoomi Adhikar Mahila (women's land rights cell) where available

Vasundhara has specific experience facilitating single women's land rights under the FRA in Odisha and can provide guidance for organisations beginning this work.

What Progress Looks Like at 24 Months

Land rights work is the slowest, most unglamorous, and most legally fragile work in the women's empowerment landscape. A 24-month programme should realistically achieve:

- A documented baseline: how many women in the operational area hold land titles, in what categories (IFR, patta, PMAY-G), as sole owners vs. joint holders
- A target list: how many women are entitled to titles they don't currently hold
- Progress against that list: how many new or corrected titles have been achieved
- At least one revenue official engagement that has changed practice in how new titles are issued

These are small numbers against the scale of the problem. They are also irreversible — a land title, once correctly issued, is a permanent legal instrument. The woman who holds it holds it for the rest of her life, and it can be inherited.

That permanence is what makes the work worth its slowness.

Related Knowledge Commons content: Women Empowerment Sector Primer (Sector 02) · Social Justice & Tribal Welfare Sector Primer (Sector 03) — FRA and community rights · Practice Note: Community Forest Rights — From Title to Livelihood

Evidence Grade: B — Multi-study. This Practice Note draws on the Social Innovations Journal study on land rights and tribal women's empowerment in Odisha (2024), the Landesa Odisha pilot documentation, IJNRD analysis of tribal women's FRA rights (2023), World Bank Land Governance Assessment Framework for Odisha, and Vasundhara's field documentation on women's FRA rights in Odisha. Last reviewed: April 2026.

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