



Securing land rights for the world's poorest



Shakti beams with pride as she holds her patta – the title to her land.

Before she became a landowner, she almost never smiled. Shakti was among the poorest of the poor, a landless laborer earning only \$1 a day and – struggling to provide even one meal a day for her family. In her rural village in the Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh, she had few options. She worked as a seasonal agricultural laborer, when work was available. When it wasn't, she worked as a stone crusher, a physically exhausting and dangerous job. She owned only one sari and could only afford to feed her children rice gruel. When Shakti attained secure land rights, all of that changed.

In partnership with the Andhra Pradesh government and the World Bank, RDI designed a land purchase program that works like micro-lending. Qualifying small self-help groups of the poorest villagers – mainly women – are eligible to receive government grants to finance purchases of land available on the market. Shakti and other landless women in her village applied collectively for a loan to buy a plot of land. With assistance from local paralegals, the women negotiated with sellers and split the land parcels among themselves.

For women in India, land rights can mean the difference between a life of grinding poverty and a life of opportunity. Without secure rights or access to land, women must depend on men for their physical well-being, economic

stability, and social status. If a woman's relationships with the men in her life terminate, she has no safety net. She will not inherit a portion of the family land given to her brothers when her father dies. She will not be given a share of land when she marries. She will have no place in her husband's village and is not welcomed back in her natal home if her husband abandons or divorces her. She may be separated from her children, deprived of food and shelter and left destitute.

It is an impossible choice: security of shelter and basic welfare often carries the price of continued abuse, while leaving usually means abandoning her children and migrating to cities to join thousands of others who beg in the streets or turn to prostitution to survive.

Secure land rights provided Shakti with the foundation she needed to lift herself from the crushing poverty of day-to-day survival and created options for her entire family. She has new status in her village and in her home. She has control over the income from the land, and can now provide three meals a day with vital micro-nutrients for her children. Even better, Shakti can now afford to send her children to school and give them a brighter future of opportunity.

"Namma bhoomi," says Shakti, pointing to the fields behind her. Her daughter, now literate and fluent in English translates. "This is our land." For Shakti and her family, a little land went a very long way.

*Strengthening
Rights for Women
and Girls . . .*

Shakti's Story