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FROM INVISIBLE LABOR TO VISIBLE LEADERSHIP: LESSONS FROM GCWAS2026

Dr Anuradha Agrawal

“New Delhi played host to a watershed moment for women in agriculture this March. The Global Conference on Women in Agri-Food Systems (GCWAS2026) wasn't just another policy meet—it was a powerful call to action, timed perfectly with the UN's International Year of the Woman Farmer (2026).”

A Global Conference on Women in Agri-Food Systems (GCWAS-2026) was held in New Delhi from March 12-14, 2026, which was organized by the Trust for Advancement of Agricultural Sciences (TAAS), Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers Rights Authority

(PPV&FRA) and Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and supported by a consortium of 36 leading agricultural bodies, private sector and NGOs. The conference convened over 850 participants from India and 18 countries spanning scientists, policymakers, industry leaders, entrepreneurs, development practitioners, women

farmers, start-ups, and students creating a vibrant global platform for dialogue and collaboration. With representation from 22+ Indian states and women comprising nearly 60% of attendees, the event reflected both diversity and strong female participation. Under the theme “Driving Progress, Attaining New Heights” the conference produced the ‘Delhi Declaration’, a formal action plan calling for a new Global Alliance, gender-responsive policies, and a robust data ecosystem to address systemic inequalities in agri-food systems .

Power-packed Inaugural Session

The star power in GCWAS-2026 was undeniable. President of India, Smt Droupadi Murmu inaugurated the event, with Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Union Minister of Agriculture & Farmers’ Welfare, as Guest of Honour. But what truly electrified the room was the presence of grassroots women farmers sharing the stage with global experts like Dr. Agnes Kalibata and World Food Prize laureate Dr. Shakuntala Thilsted. Welcoming the United Nations’ declaration of 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer, President Murmu said the initiative would help address gender inequalities and promote women’s leadership in agriculture. The President stated that several women farmers who have made remarkable contributions to organic farming, seed conservation and community leadership have been honoured with the Padma Shri, including Kamala Devi Rongmei, Maharashtra’s ‘Seed Mother’ Rahibai Soma Popere, Bihar’s ‘Kisan Chachi’ Rajkumari Devi, and Odisha’s Kamala Pujari.

Minister Chouhan described women as ‘Narayani’ and praised their contributions to food systems, emphasizing the need for strengthening their role in farming. He highlighted key initiatives like the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana (National Rural Livelihood Mission), which has mobilised over 10 crore women through more than 90 lakh Self-Help Groups, with nearly three crore women emerging as ‘Lakshpati Didis’ earning over ₹1 lakh

annually, and a target to empower six crore women economically in the coming years. He also noted the rising role of women in agricultural research and education, citing the work of the ICAR–Central Institute for Women in Agriculture, Bhubaneswar, since 1996, and the significant increase in women’s representation in the Agricultural Research Service from 7.9% in 2006–07 to nearly 41% in 2023–24, reflecting their growing contribution to agricultural science and innovation.

Dr R.S. Paroda, Chief Patron of GCWAS-2026, & Chairman, TAAS, said that the conference marks the beginning of a historic movement to recognise and strengthen the transformative role of women across the agricultural value chain from production and post-production to value addition and improved market linkages. In her welcome address, Dr Renu Swarup, GCWAS-2026 Chair and Former Secretary, Department of Biotechnology, Government of India, highlighted that the conference aims to translate dialogue into action by developing strategies and a roadmap to institutionalise gender-responsive initiatives with stronger policy support.

Conference Format and Thematic Sessions

The conference featured one plenary and nine thematic technical sessions, along with 371 poster presentations and 65 rapid oral presentations. It was structured around nine thematic sessions designed to bridge the gap between high-level policy and grassroots reality. These included ‘Interface with Global Women Trailblazers’, ‘Driving Progress, Attaining New Heights’, ‘Mainstreaming Gender Equality and Social Inclusion,’ ‘Emerging and Disruptive Technologies for Gender-Transformative Change’ ‘Building Women Leadership in the Agri-Food Sector’, ‘Empowering Women through Economic Inclusion’, ‘Gender Dynamics in Policy and Market Access’. Two special sessions were the ‘Women Farmers Forum – Breaking the Stereotypes’ and ‘Youth Forum: Nurturing the Next Generation of Agri-Food Leaders’.



Deliberations were held on strategies to place women in decision-making roles in science and policy, financial models, market linkages, and simplifying regulatory processes to help women transition from “custodians to entrepreneurs,” particularly in seed value chains, climate-smart innovations, women-friendly equipment to reduce drudgery and localized digital advisories. But the conference wasn’t about patting backs. Sessions tackled uncomfortable truths - why women still own less land, access less credit, and remain invisible in agricultural statistics despite doing most of the work. It was emphasized that disruptive technologies need to reach rural women, not just urban start-ups. The conference called for simplified regulatory processes and growth capital, not just microloans. The Youth Forum reminded everyone that the next generation of women farmers needs mentorship and networks now, not later.

An engaging exhibition highlighted not only the academic and scientific advancements in women-focused

technologies, but also brought together a diverse range of women-led enterprises to showcase their products, innovation, and talent.

International Participation

The conference was not merely a national event but a global knowledge exchange. It featured a stellar line-up of international thought leaders and representatives from 18 countries. Some notable international experts included Dr Bram Govaerts (Director General, CIMMYT), Dr. Agnes Kalibata (Founder, Connect4Impact; former AGRA President), Dr. Shakuntala H. Thilsted (World Food Prize Laureate, WorldFish), Dr. Soumya Swaminathan (Chairperson, MSSRF) and Dr. Nitya Rao (Professor of Gender and Development, University of East Anglia).

Major Outcomes and Institutional Commitments

Every conference produces a statement. GCWAS2026 produced a roadmap. The

final valedictory session, chaired by Dr M.L. Jat, Secretary, Department of Agricultural Research and Education & Director General of ICAR, and Dr R.S. Paroda, emphasized that the conference was the “beginning of renewed action” and core recommendations focused on moving from “invisible labor to visible leadership”.

The most significant output of the conference was the adoption of the ‘Delhi Declaration’. Presented by Dr. Renu Swarup, the declaration is a roadmap for moving beyond dialogue to decisive action. Key pillars of the declaration include:

- Establishing a Global Alliance: A call to create a permanent “Global Alliance on Women in Agri-Food Systems (GAWAS)” to sustain momentum.
- Policy & Institutional Reforms: Urging governments to ensure women’s access to land, finance, technology, and digital innovation.
- Data Ecosystems: The systematic

collection of gender-disaggregated data to support evidence-based policymaking.

- Accountability: Establishment of periodic gender audits and transparent progress reporting.
- National Gender Platform (India): Dr. M. L. Jat, announced that India is developing a national gender platform connecting over 900 institutions (including ICAR institutes and agricultural universities) to strengthen research, extension, and capacity building focused on women.

As one participant put it during the Women Farmers Forum: “We don’t need sympathy. We need systems.” GCWAS2026 closed with a felicitation ceremony honoring successful women farmers. But the real work, speakers emphasized, begins now. The Delhi Declaration is a promise. The Global Alliance is a mechanism. The rest is up to governments, institutions, and all of us.



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