

SPEECH BY HER EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA SHRIMATI PRATIBHA DEVISINGH PATIL AT THE VALEDICTORY FUNCTION OF THE GLOBAL CONFERENCE ON WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here at the Valedictory function of the Global Conference on Women in Agriculture and I take this opportunity to greet all participants. I understand that valuable suggestions have been made by delegates during discussions under different thematic areas; and there has been exchange of experiences on market linkages at the Innovation Market Place, organized as an event of this Conference, to showcase technology and products by farm women.

There is a deep inter-linkage between women and agriculture, the development of both being essential for the progress of every nation. The first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once said that "in order to awaken the people it is the women who have to be awakened. Once she is on move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves." Similarly, to describe the significance of agriculture, he said, 'Agriculture is the basis of all our development work and everything can wait but not agriculture.'

This Conference is timely because the state of world agriculture has thrown up many questions about global preparedness for a hunger free planet through higher and sustainable agricultural growth. Global population reached the 7 billion mark last October and is expected to touch 9 billion by 2050, requiring agricultural production to grow by 70 percent. Today, there are about a billion under-nourished people in the world, with women and children being the worst affected. The food security front, demands a frontal and focused approach towards agricultural growth. We must begin by addressing the needs of the farming community, including women farmers and empowering them.

Agriculture can be a primary driver of the agenda of the empowerment of women. Globally, of the economically active population in agriculture about 43 persons are women. In India, 60 percent of farming operations are performed by women. Moreover, women contribute enormously to allied activities of agriculture like animal husbandry and fisheries. Besides, women shoulder the major

burden of household work. This amounts to stressful work conditions and drudgery. We need to think of innovations and opportunities at the village level that will not only meet the multiple needs of women and their families, but also make their lives healthy, satisfying and meaningful.

It is true that changes are taking place but much more needs to be done. Despite, many reforms and gender focused policies, both at the macro and micro levels, benefits have not fully trickled down. There is need for greater gender sensitivity during programme development, implementation and monitoring.

Women in agriculture are faced with many limitations. They have less access to agricultural land, credit, technology, opportunities and market related services, adversely impacting their productivity. The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11 Report of the Food and Agriculture Organization, notes that reducing this gender gap between male and female farmers could raise yields on farms operated by women by 20 to 30 percent. As a consequence, there would be significant gains in agricultural production at national levels, and it is estimated that this would result in a reduction of undernourished people in the world by 12 to 17 percent, which translates into 100 to 150 million fewer people living in hunger. Bridging the gender gap is, thus, important for food security objectives. In this context, I would like to mention that two years ago, the Government of India initiated a scheme on Women Farmers Empowerment, popularly called 'Mahila Kisan Sasaktikaran Pariyojana', which enables women farmers to gain more control over the production resources and access to inputs and services. It would be useful to form Mahila Kisan Mandals in every village, to educate women on different aspects of agriculture and related activities. I also believe that tapping the potential of Rainfed and Dry land farming is necessary. In this, water management would be essential, again an area where the role of women is crucial, and needs to be supported.

Can we empower women without equipping them with new knowledge and skills? For a long time, the research and development systems have considered only men as target groups. National Agricultural Research and Development systems are yet to be adequately sensitive to the needs of women which are often different from that of men. Thus, special efforts have to be made to make Research and Development structures, give priority to technological options that reduce the drudgery of women working on farms. I would like to mention that the National Agricultural Research System of India led by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and consisting of research institutes, agricultural universities and Krishi Vigyan Kendras, is one of the largest systems in the world. ICAR has taken a lead in institutionalizing research on women in agriculture by establishing a dedicated institution for the purpose. Moreover, it is encouraging that the enrolment of girls in different degree level courses in Agricultural Universities is increasing. I hope this trend continues which will also result in a positive impact on extension services. Today, much of the scientific knowledge and technologies does not reach rural women for various reasons. This needs rectification. Research systems must also seek the inputs of women, as they have historically been the source of much traditional knowledge and innovations at the grassroots level.

Women have a sizeable presence in every stage of food production. We must work towards models for entrepreneurship development among women. A strict sectoral approach to agriculture will not be sufficient, and there should be greater integration with other sectors of the economy. Industry and the services sector must reach out to develop linkages with agriculture for end-to-end operations, from the sowing stage to the selling of produce, including value addition. Farmers can be agri-preneurs who interact with industry to work out win-win options.

A growing concern is the competition that agriculture is facing from other sectors in retaining the workers within its fold. Already, there is large scale migration of workers from agriculture to non-agriculture. The question is how to retain the critical level of human resource in agriculture to sustain the growth momentum. Will more women get involved in agriculture, resulting in greater feminization of agriculture? In some countries this trend is emerging, and policy framers must pay attention to issues that arise from this phenomenon.

In today's world, ICT can provide access to new information on market, trade, technology, investment and services related to education, health, nutrition and help farmers in taking rational decisions. I call upon scientists and extension professionals, to think of innovations in the use of ICT in rural areas, for bringing women into the mainstream of agricultural development and reducing gender disparity.

I congratulate the organizers for hosting this Conference. I hope that the outcomes of this Conference will contribute to enhancing agricultural production, and in bringing a transformation in the lives of women engaged in the sector.

Thank you.

Jai Hind!