

Press Release

**Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women's Studies, JMI conducts a special lecture on  
South Atlantic women's food heritage systems**

New Delhi, March 17, 2026

As part of a Special Lecture, the Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women's Studies hosted Dr. Paola Vargas Arana for a lecture titled *"Women's Food Heritage Systems: Feminist Political Ecology in the South Atlantic."* on 13<sup>th</sup> March. The lecture highlighted the historical continuity and contemporary resilience of African and Afro-Colombian women's agricultural knowledge, situating their practices as critical infrastructures for food security and climate resilience.

The programme began with a welcome address by Dr. Amina Hussain, coordinator of the Special Lecture, followed by the introduction of Dr. Paola by Prof. Nishat Zaidi, Honorary Director of the Centre. Dr. Paola's lecture systematically traced a five-century women-led food heritage system linking West Africa and Afro-Colombian territories. She demonstrated how enslaved African women carried sophisticated ecological and culinary knowledge to Colombian goldfields, where they actively adapted cultivation practices to new ecosystems by selecting, experimenting, and recombining crops—neither randomly nor passively. The lecture highlighted the bi-directional movement of staples: African crops such as plantain, yam, and rice travelled west, while American crops like cassava, peanuts, and maize moved east, with women experts driving integration in both directions.

Emphasizing adaptive continuity, Dr. Paola argued that women's practices were never static survivals but dynamic reconfigurations amid enslavement, displacement, climate change, and policy pressures. She contrasted this resilient knowledge system with dominant agrotechnological models privileging productivity growth, monocultures, and corporate concentration—approaches the 2025 *Lancet Commission* identified as primary drivers of planetary boundary transgressions. The lecture also addressed gender and power, documenting how the slave trade disrupted women-led agricultural systems in West Africa by privileging Asian rice (*Oryza sativa*) for vessel provisioning. This shift masculinized agricultural authority and eroded women's traditional control over seeds, land, and food production. Yet, Afro-Colombian women continue to innovate—transforming rubble slopes and dumping sites in Medellín into agroecological gardens, cooperatives, and community restaurants, while rehabilitating youth through food-centered programs.

Dr. Paola concluded by arguing that food heritage contributes materially to nutritional security, and that feminist political ecology provides the necessary framework to recognize women's ecological and food knowledge as emerging from

historically produced labour responsibilities rather than naturalized gender roles. She emphasized that women's knowledge must be treated not as cultural context but as infrastructure for food security, with gender understood as a critical variable in resource access, ecological change, and sustainable food systems.

The lecture presented compelling evidence drawn from contemporary contexts ranging from The Gambia, where the rice import dependency stands at 83%, with fruit and vegetable consumption far below recommended levels, alongside rising obesity and iron deficiency to Colombia, where 42% of Afro-Colombian people face food insecurity, exacerbated by maize import surges following trade agreements and mass internal displacement. The lecture also situates environmental data from to highlight how food systems contribute nearly 30% of global greenhouse emissions, while research demonstrated that Afro-descendant collective territories in South America experience 29–35% less annual tree cover loss compared to non-Afro areas.

The insightful session was followed by concluding remarks from Prof. Nishat Zaidi and an engaging Q&A session which allowed participants to probe further into themes such as feminist political ecology, ecological justice, and the transformative potential of women-led food heritage systems.

The lecture officially concluded with a vote of thanks delivered by Dr. Amina Hussain, reaffirming the dedication of the Centre to celebrate International Women's Day not only as a symbolic occasion but as a living practice of creating spaces for critical engagement, solidarity, and feminist futures.

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## Food security as a contested terrain

Food policy has largely prioritised **yield-centred agrotechnological solutions**, despite persistent food insecurity.

Dominant agrifood models still privilege **productivity growth, monocultures, external inputs, and corporate concentration**. Critical scholarship has pressed **nutrition, agency, rights, and sustainability** (HLPE, 2020; Clapp et al., 2025; Rao et al., 2025).

The 2025 Lancet Commission underscores the ecological damage of current food systems. **My intervention: food heritage contributes materially to nutritional security.**



Paola Vargas Arana

Amina Hussain

Nishat Zaidi

BREAK THE SHAME

Vaibhav Saini

Aparna Dixit

Aparna Dixit