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Women in SPACE

Anne Fisher: 1st mother in space

The first Soviet cosmonaut, Valentina Tereshkova, shouted a euphoric “Take off your hat, sky, I’m coming!” when blasting off from Baikonur to begin her ride to the stars, on June 16, 1963. This was at the height of the Cold War, when State propaganda dictated mission requirements. What was important was to be first in everything and at any cost. After her spaceflight, Valentina became an instant celebrity throughout the world and the new symbol of Soviet space prowess.

It took nineteen years to see another woman in space, and once again it was a Soviet female cosmonaut: Svetlana Savitskaya. Once more, politics played an important role, as the Soviet Union strove to reaffirm its space race superiority at a time when the United States had selected the first female astronauts. In April 1982 when Sally Ride was assigned to her first shuttle mission, the name Svetlana Savitskaya suddenly appeared on the crew of the Soyuz T-7, and Svetlana managed to fly before Sally Ride. The competition between these global superpowers was reflected even in space. Again the Soviets arrived first and overshadowed the pre-announced flights of the six U.S. female “Shuttlenauts”.

The emancipation of women was a cornerstone of Communist propaganda: in all countries of the Soviet bloc most women could study, work, divorce, have an abortion; women were also admitted into the armed forces (especially in aviation). The inclusion of women in the armed forces (which ran the Soviet space program) was the catalyst that allowed women in the Soviet space program long before their American competitors.

Despite this, however, very few Soviet or Russian females have followed Valentina in more than half a century; their fourth female cosmonaut just went into space in September 2014.

“Sexism has played an important role in limiting the number of Russian female cosmonauts,” said Yelena Dobrokvashina, a female cosmonaut who was never given the opportunity to fly.

Right Stuff but Wrong Sex

The story of the Mercury-13 (13 female candidate astronauts selected by a private clinic but refused by NASA) shows that although the cultural context was different, in the sixties the time wasn’t ripe for U.S. women in space either.

Until the late seventies, NASA refused to consider including women in the space program. The original decision by President Eisenhower to choose astronauts from the ranks of the best military test pilots intrinsically excluded women, without worrying if this threatened some basic principles of democracy. No one, for decades, ever questioned the role of men in space or a man on the moon. When people thought of astronauts, they always thought of men. The attitude of NASA eventually changed, but progress was slow.

NASA Opens to Women

The U.S. Navy began accepting women for their first pilot training courses in 1974. The U.S. Air Force opened to women in 1976, although they weren’t allowed in test pilot careers until 1988.

After the U.S. military opened aviation to women, even NASA acquiesced. With the development of the Space Shuttle program, a new type of astronaut was introduced: Mission Specialist. A Mission Specialist was a researcher with a deep technical and scientific background. In its 1977 call for astronauts, ten years after the previous appeal, NASA, despite some internal resistance, finally opened the Astronaut Corps to women. Following this



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announcement, NASA headquarters expected a flood of applications from female candidates, but after six months only 93 were submitted. NASA enlisted the help of Nichelle Nichols, the successful actress who played Lieutenant Uhura on the popular television series *Star Trek*. After six months 10,000 additional applications arrived, including 1500 from women. And from there NASA selected, for the first time, six women to be integrated in its Astronaut Corps. Today, in the western world, women in space have become commonplace. Women are now fully integrated as ordinary members of this extraordinary club known as the Astronaut Corps.

Payload Specialist, Mission Specialist, Flight Engineer, Pilot Commander, Mission Commander

There is no position that NASA female astronauts haven't occupied in the last years, both in the Space Shuttle and in the International Space Station programs. Now when a woman leaves for a mission, her name is just mentioned along with the other colleagues, as "astronaut", not as "woman astronaut". The departure of a woman into space doesn't make headline news anymore; this suggests that female integration in the space program is complete. Men and women work together on the International Space Station with interchangeable roles: no difference in training, or in the operation, or in the level of responsibility.

Six American female astronauts have flown in space five times: Shannon Lucid, Bonnie Dunbar, Marsha Ivins, Tamara Jernigan, Susan Helms and Janice Voss. This is quite remarkable, especially if we consider that the American female astronauts began to fly in space just thirty years ago and that the overall record of flights in space, held by the two American astronauts Jerry L. Ross and Franklin Chang-Diaz, is seven space missions.

"Female quotas" are Rising Up

NASA active female astronauts in January 2016 are twelve, and account for 25.5% of the entire Astronaut Corps. That percentage is not bad if we consider that, for example, in the United States there is one woman in seven in the Police Corps and only one in twenty in the Air Force. With the end of the Shuttle era, the NASA Astronaut Corps sharply decreased from 129 astronauts in 2000 to just 46 today, but the percentage of women is growing. Women made up 50% of the astronauts

appointed by NASA in its most recent selection in June 2013 - the highest percentage of women ever selected so far in a chosen group.

Recently, China has launched its first two female "taikonauts" ("space navigators"). Currently out of ten taikonauts flown so far, two are women - almost the same percentage reached by the U.S.

In the European space history there are currently only three female astronauts: one English (who has never entered the ESA Astronaut Corps), one French (who left ESA in 2002) and the Italian Samantha Cristoforetti who last year set a new duration record for a single mission of a woman in space.

It is vital that we acknowledge the remarkable accomplishments of all of these women - from Tereshkova to Ride to Cristoforetti. Over the years, they helped pave the way for gender equality in spacelight. Their enthusiasm, hard work, and commitment taught us that reaching for the stars was not beyond our grasp. •

Umberto is an Italian writer who has written the book "Donne nello Spazio" ("Women in Space") among other publications.

- 1 - Valentina Tereshkova: 1st woman in space
- 2 - Eileen Collins: 1st woman shuttle pilot
- 3 - Sally Ride: 1st American woman in space
- 4 - Helen Sharman: 1st British woman in space

