



INTERNATIONAL ASTRONAUTICAL FEDERATION

NEWS ITEM 09/24/2013(2)

IAC 2013, PLENARY 4: Women in space - a 50-year Success Story

It was standing room only as more than 1000 delegates crowded in to the hugely popular 'Women in Space' Plenary at the 64th International Astronautical Congress (IAC) in Beijing, China, today (Tuesday 24 September 2013).

They were there to hear Chinese taikonauts Liu Yang and Wang Yaping alongside Chiaki Mukai, Japan's first female astronaut, and NASA's Sandy Magnus, veteran of a four-and-a-half month stint on the International Space Station (ISS) and member of the very last Space Shuttle crew.

The organisers had also planned for the attendance of Valentina Tereshkova, the Russian cosmonaut who became the first ever woman to fly in space 50 years ago.

Mazlan Othman, Director of the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (NOOSA), opened the meeting by saying the role of women in spaceflight was not as commonplace as might be thought because statistics showed only 10 percent of all astronauts have been women.

Though not an astronaut herself, Mrs Othman was responsible for setting up the Malaysian Space Agency, which in turn led to the country's first astronaut in October 2007 when Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor visited the International Space Station (ISS).

She apologised on behalf of Tereshkova who, as a member of the Russian Parliament had been unable to attend due to government business.

Dr Igor Sorokin was the brave man to stand in the shoes of Tereshkova and make a short pictorial presentation on behalf of one of Russia's most famous female figures.

"I am disappointed more than all that she couldn't come but she is now a politician and busy in Russian parliament. No one here can replace her - not even myself," he joked.

Tereshkova's flight was part of a space race at the time between Russia and the United States and Dr Sorokin quoted the words and thoughts of the cosmonaut as she recalled the experience of her historic spaceflight.

Liu Yang, the first Chinese woman in space on 16 June 2012 when she served as a crew member on the Shenzhou 9 space mission, received rapturous applause when she took to the stage.

Speaking through an interpreter she explained that she had been a military pilot in 2003 when the first Chinese astronaut was launched into space and at the time had never contemplated going into space herself.

“The most amazing thing is the miracle of turning dreams into reality and after two years of training I was lucky enough to be able to fly into space on China’s first manual rendezvous and docking mission,” she said.

“In the space environment everything seems to take on a life of its own.” Liu Yang described the experience of micro gravity as “like a bird flying in the sky and like a fish swimming in the water” with normal emotions amplified.

She said her over-riding impression of viewing Earth from orbit was a poignant reminder that there is “only one world and only one home” which we must all protect and look after.

Wang Yang was the second female astronaut to be named by the Chinese authorities and the second Chinese woman in space on Shenzhou 10 in June 2013.

She told delegates that her mission in orbit had lasted 15 days and 15 hours in orbit, and that she believed having female members of space crews made missions “more harmonious”.

“Spaceflight is certainly not an ordinary experience and I was deeply shocked by the view of a beautiful Earth,” she said.

During her mission Wang Yaping conducted a 40 minute lesson from space for school children and students across China.

She showed film footage of her crew demonstrating experiments from the Chinese space station along with pictures of the students back on Earth.

“It was truly inspirational and on returning to Earth I received many letters from children who had been inspired by their unique lesson from space,” she said.

It was then the turn of Chiaki Mukai, of the Japanese Space Agency (JAXA), who was the first Japanese woman in space and the first Japanese citizen to undertake two spaceflights.

Both were US Space Shuttle missions, the first on STS-65 aboard Columbia in July 1994, a Spacelab mission, and the second on STS-95 aboard Discovery in 1998. In total she has spent 23 days in space.

Mrs Mukai told delegates that she did not have a childhood dream of travelling into space because at that time there was no Japanese space programme.

“I was 11 years old when Valentina Tereshkova flew into space. It was very exciting but this was something happening completely outside of my world,” she explained.

Years later in 1985 she came across article advertising the recruitment of Japanese astronauts and was successful in her application. “We are now living in an era of using and exploiting the space environment and realising the value of our precious space resources,” she said.

“As we are now in the second half-century of human space exploration I believe that we will continue to bring the benefits of space back to life on Earth.”

Sandra Magnus, Executive Director of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA), served as Flight Engineer onboard the International Space Station (ISS) as part of Expedition 18, having flown into orbit on STS-126 in November 2008 and returning on STS-119 in March 2009 after logging 133 days in orbit.

Magnus also flew into the history books as a member of the final Space Shuttle crew on mission STS-135 in July 2011.

She told delegates that it was 15 years after Tereshkova’s flight that the first US woman flew in space and what brought about the change was the operation of the Space Shuttle.

Now some about 45 women from the US have flown on the Shuttle and there have been two female Shuttle commanders, two ISS commanders, as well as female spacewalkers, flight directors and mission controllers.

Showing a video of the final Space Shuttle mission, she said: “We consider it a responsibility and a pleasure to talk about our time in space.

“We live in very interesting times because more and more people will have access to space. Currently Italian and Russian women training for missions to the Space Station.”

She suggested that ultimately the more people who have the opportunity to experience the “amazing space environment” the better because it gives a completely different appreciation of our planet.”

Since Tereshkova’s historic flight in June 1963 some 56 women from nine countries have flown once or several times in space, representing more than 10 percent of the global astronaut corps.

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