Claiming power, creating equity: women shaping the future of space

World Space Week 2025 *October 8, 2025*

During this year's *World Space Week*, a global audience came together for an inspiring conversation on *Women in Space: Claiming Power and Creating Equity*. The virtual session, hosted by Dr. Mindy Howard, CEO of the Cosmic Girls Foundation, highlighted the UN Office of Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) Space4Women Landmark Study on Gender Equality in the Space Sector, a powerful examination of women's participation and treatment in the space industry, from early education in STEM fields to workplace interactions, promotion opportunities, and leadership roles. There has been a great deal of progress in the past 20 years, but there are many areas where change must happen to create a more equitable environment for women's career growth.

From India to Albania, Ethiopia to Canada, the audience represented a truly global community united by one vision: a future in space that includes everyone.

Setting the stage: the reality of gender in space

Moderator Sabrina Cartan, a communications strategist and *Roddenberry Foundation* Fan Ambassador, opened the session by reminding participants that World Space Week is not only about exploration beyond Earth, but also about ensuring that the benefits of space reach every person *on* Earth. Many scientific innovations that were initially developed for space are used in daily life, especially in Western countries with access to technology and cutting-edge medical care were emphasized by the panelists, alongside the importance of forward-thinking education initiatives that encourage boys and girls equally to pursue STEM careers.

The initial discussion centered on the findings of UNOOSA's gender report, which revealed both progress and persistent gaps:

- **58%** of respondents felt that girls are *not equally encouraged* to pursue STEM subjects.
- **65%** believed women do *not receive the same respect or social evaluation* as men in the space sector.
- **48%** reported that women entrepreneurs and scientists face *unequal funding opportunities*.
- Alarmingly, **1 in 6 women** had experienced *sexual harassment*, and **1 in 7** reported *physical harassment* in the space field.

These numbers underscored what panelists called a "2025 paradox" - enormous technological progress, yet lingering inequity.

“Honestly, it’s 2025, and I can’t believe we’re still having this conversation,” said Dr. Mindy. “This study is exactly why the work we’re doing at Cosmic Girls matters. We don’t want the next generation to face the same barriers.”

Global voices, shared challenges
The panel featured four remarkable women whose experiences spanned continents and industries:

- Dr. Mindy Howard, selected astronaut and CEO of the Cosmic Girls Foundation
- Keisha Schahaff, astronaut, wellness coach, and the first Caribbean woman to travel to space with Virgin Galactic
- Amy Imhoff, communications consultant for NASA’s IMAP mission and digital media strategist for space and media clients
- Nana Visitor, actor, author, and cultural voice for women’s empowerment through her iconic role as Major Kira on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*

Together, they embodied the intersection of science, storytelling, and social change. “It’s not just about breaking the technical barriers,” said Schahaff, from Antigua and Barbuda. “It’s about breaking the *narrative barriers* - the ones that tell women they don’t belong.” She spoke of judgment and suppression that women face in her region and around the world, but also of the transformation that happens when women support each other. “I had to become my own role model first,” she said. “Now, my daughters can see that they can do anything.”

Changing the story
Representation, the panelists agreed, is a catalyst for change. Cultural narratives - whether in the media, in classrooms, or in boardrooms - shape who we believe can reach for the stars.

“If you can see it, you can be it,” said Nana Visitor, recalling how *Star Trek* inspired real-world astronauts like Samantha Cristoforetti. “It’s not just about the jobs. It’s about showing that women can be full-spectrum humans - capable of mistakes, creativity, leadership, and brilliance.”

The discussion explored how gender discrimination often intersects with race, disability, and socioeconomic status - and how inclusive storytelling, from entertainment to education, can open new pathways for young girls to imagine themselves in science and space.

Building a collaborative future
Panelist Amy Imhoff reflected on her experience at the NASA IMAP mission launch, where diversity and collaboration were central to success. “It wasn’t just a technical milestone,” she said. “It was a community event - families, colleagues, people from every background

celebrating years of teamwork. That's what space should represent." The IMAP mission and the two spacecraft that launched with it represent thousands of diverse individuals of many races and backgrounds, representing folks across the LGBT+ community and showcasing women in leadership roles.

Mindy added that collaboration, empathy, and communication - often associated with women's leadership - are not "soft skills," but essential ones. "When we talk about establishing communities beyond Earth," she noted, "we must not export the same inequities that exist here. We have an opportunity to start differently - and more collaboratively."

Claiming space – turning commitment into real change
As the conversation shifted toward DEI, Mindy shared her trademark mix of candor and insight, noting that diversity, equity, and inclusion aren't just buzzwords, but a blueprint for humanity's progress, especially in space.

She explained that the real misunderstanding around DEI lies in the narrative. "No one wants unqualified hires," she said. "But if two candidates are equally qualified, why wouldn't you choose the diverse candidate? That's how you start shifting culture."

Her point struck home - cultural change doesn't happen through slogans or side projects. It starts at the top, with leadership accountability, measurable goals, and transparent progress. It means embedding DEI in hiring, promoting women into greater leadership roles, and effective communication not as separate initiatives, but as a shared responsibility.

Dr. Mindy illustrated this point with a simple yet eye-opening example: tracking "airtime" in meetings. "We'd measure who spoke, who got acknowledged, and when. Often a woman's idea would go unnoticed until repeated by a man — then it was suddenly brilliant." These subtle moments, she said, reveal how bias operates below the surface, shaping who gets heard.

Even after years of training and millions invested, progress at her former company barely moved the needle. "People still pick people who look like themselves," she noted. "Awareness isn't enough. You need vigilance, structure, and, honestly, a critical mass of women in leadership before real change happens."

Amy shared astronaut Jeanette Epps's story and how she'd noted that her resumé, when anonymized as "J. Epps," looked indistinguishable from a white male fighter pilot's. Seeing a female name triggers bias," Amy reflected. "That's why blind recruitment matters. Skills should speak louder than assumptions."

From there, the panelists dove into their personal journeys of "claiming space," which looked different for everyone but reverberated with a common theme of stepping outside of prescribed gender roles:

- Nana shared how writing her book freed her from internalized limits - realizing she didn't have to live inside the box others defined. "The best way to keep women without power," she said, "is to keep us separated. Once we lift each other, we're unstoppable."
- Schahaff spoke of her transformation after seeing Earth from space. "Up there, I felt love, belonging, and acceptance. I came back reborn - realizing I never had to dim my light again."
- Amy reflected on resilience: "People said I was lucky. This isn't luck. It's hard work. No one hands you a seat at the table - a lot of times, you have to build your own."
- Dr. Mindy closed that segment with a full-circle moment: "When I founded Cosmic Girls, it stopped being about just me reaching space - it became about helping women everywhere do the same."

The Q&A turned global - with questions from Ethiopia, Canada, and India, highlighting both the universal challenges women face and the power of community in overcoming them.

Schahaff shared how fear almost kept her from boarding her spacecraft: "My passion became bigger than my fear." Dr. Mindy added that perfectionism is a "silent killer" of confidence. "Let it go. You might need a diaper in space - so what? You're in the arena."

Resources came next - and unexpectedly, Taylor Swift entered the conversation. "Honestly," Amy said, "therapy and Taylor Swift. Watching a woman set boundaries and own her narrative - that's powerful." Nana emphasized neuroscience and self-regulation: "Learning how your brain and nervous system work is the foundation of resilience." All panelists encouraged the audience, which ranged in age in experience, to read more to expand their knowledge base, listen to podcasts and follow accounts that provided tools to build confidence and inner strength.

From awareness to action

As the conversation concluded, one message resonated across time zones: gender equity in space is not just a women's issue - it is a *human advancement issue*. The future of exploration depends on the inclusion of all voices, all minds, and all perspectives.

"The work is never done," said Visitor. "Progress must be constant. Each generation must push forward - together."

From spaceflight to storytelling, these women are redefining what is possible when we work collaboratively and inclusively, reminding the world that the next frontier of exploration begins not in the stars, but in our shared commitment to equity here on Earth.

As the discussion wrapped, the tone turned hopeful - even urgent. From funding cuts to cultural backlash, the panelists didn't sugarcoat the obstacles ahead. The message, however, was clear: progress depends on courage, storytelling, and education.

"Don't wait for a seat at the table," Amy said. "Build your own."
"Don't dim your light," added Schahaff. "Be the tornado. Be the volcano." Dr. Mindy, in closing the event, reminded everyone that Cosmic Girls exists to empower, to connect, and to prove that when women claim their space - in the boardroom, in the lab, or among the stars - we all rise higher.

Keep looking to the stars. Cosmic Girls is just getting started.

About the UNOOSA Gender Study
The United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) works to promote international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space and ensure that the benefits of space exploration are shared equitably. The 2025 Gender Study explores barriers and opportunities for women's participation in the global space sector.

About Cosmic Girls Foundation
Founded by astronaut trainer, Dr. Mindy Howard, Cosmic Girls Foundation empowers girls and women worldwide through space education, mentorship, and astronaut training; helping them build confidence, leadership, and curiosity to reach for the stars.