

Space is not a dream, it's a place where women build companies

By Cosmic Girls Foundation & UNOOSA – Space for Women

At one minute past one, voices from around the world came together for the second *Space for Women Changemakers* webinar. Time zones blurred, from Europe to the Pacific, but the message was crystal clear: space is no longer just a dream. It is a place where women are building real companies, shaping industries, and redefining leadership.

Hosted by the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) in collaboration with the Cosmic Girls Foundation, the session focused on a question many young women are asking today: How do bold ideas become real ventures in the space sector?

Empowering women to own the Space economy

Opening the session, Anne-Claire Grossias, Associate Program Officer of the Space for Women Programme at UNOOSA, reaffirmed the program's mission: to empower women and girls in a traditionally male-dominated sector and ensure they play an active role in space science, technology, innovation, exploration, and the space economy. "Space entrepreneurship matters," she emphasized. "Because owning the future of space also means owning the economic opportunities it creates." That is precisely why this webinar focused not on theory, but on real women, real companies, and real challenges.

Space as a place, not a fantasy

Mindy Howard, Founder of the Cosmic Girls Foundation, set the tone:

"We're not here to talk about space as a dream. We're here to talk about space as a place, where companies are being built by women right now." For many of the girls attending, the curiosity isn't just about *working* in space, but about shaping it. This session aimed to show what that truly looks like, including the hard parts.

From the Philippines to Global Space Ecosystems - Emeline Paat- Dahlstrom

The first keynote came from Emeline Paat -Dahlstrom, a global space entrepreneur and ecosystem builder whose journey spans continents, cultures, and decades of NewSpace evolution.

Born in the Philippines at a time when space opportunities felt impossibly distant — especially for women — Emeline's early inspiration came from *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, Arthur C. Clarke, and Carl Sagan. With a background in physics and space science, her career unfolded across institutions such as the International Space University, Singularity University, and pioneering private space ventures including Space Adventures, where she helped broker the first private citizen missions to the International Space Station. Over time, one insight became clear to her: "A sustainable space industry must be inclusive. No one can be left behind."

That realization led to the founding of SpaceBase, a social enterprise dedicated to catalyzing space ecosystems in emerging and developing countries, from New Zealand and the Pacific Islands to Southeast Asia. More recently, she co-founded the Global Space Enablers Network (G-SEN), now supporting nascent space nations across multiple continents through mentorship, knowledge-sharing, and capacity building.

Five lessons for future Space entrepreneurs

Emmeline closed her talk with lessons learned over a lifetime in space:

1. Define your Massive Transformational Purpose. A clear “North Star” helps guide every career decision.
2. Fall in love with the problem, not the technology. Real innovation starts with unmet needs, not shiny tools.
3. Create your own opportunities. Nothing happens unless you make it happen.
4. Networks matter more than résumés. Relationships open doors faster than credentials alone.
5. There is space for everyone in space. Engineers are vital, but so are lawyers, designers, business leaders, communicators, and policymakers.

“You don’t need to be a rocket scientist to belong in the space sector.”

Growing life beyond Earth - Barbara Belvisi

The second keynote took participants from ecosystems to gardens in space.

Barbara Belvisi, Founder and CEO of Interstellar Lab, shared her unconventional journey from finance to space biology, and from childhood dreams of greenhouses on other planets to building them in reality.

With no formal background in space or biology, Barbara faced skepticism at every turn. Her idea, creating controlled-environment greenhouses for space exploration, was dismissed repeatedly in Europe. So, she took her vision to the United States.

At NASA Ames Research Center, something shifted. Instead of rejection, she received support, knowledge, and encouragement. That moment became the foundation of Interstellar Lab, founded with a bold mission: To make life multi-planetary and use space technologies to preserve life on Earth.

From lunar greenhouses to commercial Space stations

Interstellar Lab’s flagship technology, the BioPod, is a self-contained, AI-driven greenhouse capable of simulating any climate on Earth and beyond. What began as a concept for lunar and Martian habitats is now used on Earth by industries ranging from agriculture to cosmetics, including major clients like L’Oréal.

The company has since:

- Won a NASA challenge to develop autonomous food production systems for deep space missions
- Built and tested space-ready biological systems in Florida
- Signed agreements to fly greenhouses aboard VAST’s commercial space station
- Partnered with AstroLab to deploy plant systems on the Moon
- Launched an artistic and educational mission inspired by *The Little Prince*, bringing a rose to space as a symbol of life, fragility, and beauty

“If we can grow flowers in space,” Barbara said, “we can grow food. And if we can grow life, we can sustain exploration.”

The real challenge for women in Space

During the discussion, one theme surfaced repeatedly: confidence.

Both speakers agreed that the greatest barrier facing young women is not capability but self-doubt.

“Men often speak when they know 50%,” Barbara noted. “Women wait until they know 90%.” The message was clear: don’t wait for permission, perfection, or certainty. Space, like entrepreneurship, rewards those willing to step forward before they feel ready.

Space needs you, exactly as you are

The webinar closed with questions from students across the globe — from India to Africa to Latin America — asking about biology, entrepreneurship, mentorship, and access.

The answer, again and again, was the same: there has never been a better time to enter the space sector. And there has never been a greater need for diverse voices, ideas, and leadership. “The best way to predict the future,” Emeline reminded the audience, “is to create it yourself.”