

Female Shuttle Crew Worth Considering

by NASA Administrator Daniel S. Goldin

“If we do indeed keep the ‘Men Only’ sign on the door of our space program, then we have really reduced ourselves to a contemptible level. If so, I say the space program isn’t worth the money, the effort, the dreams. Call it off, call it all off — or open it to the human race, the whole human race,” renowned author Isaac Asimov wrote in an article titled “No Space For Women?” in the Ladies Home Journal, March 1971.

Asimov always saw the future. Thankfully, since 1971, NASA has changed.

But it wasn’t before we denied many talented women the chance to become astronauts, including U.S. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton.

It has been nearly 30 years since Asimov’s article appeared, but gender-related issues in space exploration still create controversy. An all-female research space shuttle mission raises many questions and will require a thorough review, but it seems some prejudice lingers. The notion of an all-female mission appeared in the media almost immediately after it was first discussed. I still cannot get over how much discussion it generates.

The idea began when NASA’s chief doctor, Dr. Arnauld Nicogossian, came to my office. We talked about how many years ago, doctors and scientists didn’t do enough medical research on women’s health. Most land-based studies looked at men. Years later we are shocked to find that gender-related differences exist. These differences between the sexes go well beyond basic physiology and anatomy. In more ways than we currently understand, men and women respond differently to the environment, diseases and nutrients.

Dr. Nicogossian was concerned that NASA has been studying more male than female astronauts. Given that one of NASA’s primary goals is to ensure the safety and health of our astronauts — all of our astronauts — we need to gather the health data on men and women in space.

If we do not look into this, not only will NASA be criticized, we would be acting unethically. Just as recent women’s health studies have brought new understanding for diagnosis and treatment, future discoveries from space-based research may help solve more mysteries.

After scientific merit, the next issue to look at is why so few women apply for the space program.

Women comprise 20 percent of the astronaut corps, and the percentage of female applicants is even smaller. Among engineering and science students — one source of space-program applicants — about 15 percent are women. And among another source

of applicants, military pilots, just 2.5 percent are women. That's a real problem. If the young women of America saw five women get into a space shuttle, it might not be the worst thing that could happen.

I am not saying NASA should arbitrarily decide to fly an all-female mission. I want NASA to take a balanced approach. I asked Dr. Nicogossian to take a year or two to look into these issues, study them, hold workshops, see what the right answer is and come back with a recommendation. Within milliseconds of that discussion, half of NASA came running to my office. Everyone was interested. People kept asking, "What do you think?"

Well, I think the discussion is terrific. I have two daughters and a granddaughter. I think it is terrific that NASA cares enough to discuss a female research mission.

We don't want to employ women just because they are women. We want the most qualified candidates in our astronaut corps. But if we have five capable women who can carry out that mission, those astronauts may bring back more than valuable medical data. They may positively change American culture. Like Amelia Earhart, the U.S. National Women's Soccer team and astronaut Eileen Collins, they may inspire new confidence in millions of young women and help them realize that they can achieve anything they set out to do.

During the time NASA looks into the pros and cons of an all-female mission, I want to make sure we have an open door to hear all sides and opinions. This includes opening the dialogue to the public and to opinion leaders. So, write us a note. Let us know what you think.

And in a year or two, we will find out who will take the next bold steps in space exploration. I hope it will be the whole human race.

This article appeared in the September 6, 1999, issue of Space News.