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NASA Astronauts Complete the First All-Female Spacewalk

Karen Zraick, *The New York Times*, Oct. 2019

NASA reached a milestone on Friday when two Americans, tasked with replacing a power controller, ventured out of the International Space Station: the astronauts, Christina Koch and Jessica Meir, became the first to take part in an all-female spacewalk.

The walk, which lasted seven hours and 17 minutes and included a brief call with President Trump, was not purposefully planned by the agency. As NASA explained it, one was bound to happen eventually because of the increasing number of female astronauts.

But news of the milestone attracted far greater interest than spacewalks normally do, and on Friday, American officials celebrated it as a historic achievement. They pointed to the agency's ambitious goals to put the first woman and the next man on the moon, and then to forge a path to Mars.

Such a walk was supposed to take place in March, but it was postponed because NASA did not have two appropriately sized spacesuits available. That sparked an outcry about the legacy of sexism in the space program. For some observers, the episode underscored the challenges faced by women in fields where equipment has historically been designed with men in mind.

Dr. Meir and Ms. Koch were initially tasked with installing lithium-ion batteries next Monday, but the timeline was hastened after a power controller failed last weekend. The duo replaced the controller, which regulates the charge to the batteries that distribute solar power to the station.

Both women were part of NASA's 2013 class of eight astronaut trainees, which was the first to include equal numbers of men and women. There are now 12 female astronauts in NASA's ranks, out of a total of 38 active ones.

In an interview with NASA TV this month, Ms. Koch was asked if she was bothered that her accomplishments were often talked about in terms of her gender, or whether she believed it was important to mark milestones.

"That is something I've done a lot of thinking and reflecting on," she said. "And in the end, I do think it's important. And I think it's important because of the historical nature of what we're doing and that in the past women haven't always been at the table."

Ms. Koch added that it was "wonderful" to be a part of the space program at a time "when all contributions are being accepted, when everyone has a role, and that can lead in turn to an increased chance for success."

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