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## UAE choosing a female astronaut a huge step, says Nasa veteran

Sunita Williams excited for UAE colleagues

**SHARJAH**

BY SAJILA SASEENDRAN  
Senior Reporter

The UAE choosing a female astronaut is a huge step for the entire region, Nasa's veteran astronaut Sunita Williams has said.

Williams, who had set several records including one for the longest space flight by a US woman and another for the most extended cumulative time spent on spacewalks by a female astronaut, spoke to *Gulf News* ahead of her first session at the ongoing 42nd Sharjah International Book Fair (SIBF).

Having a qualified female astronaut like Nora Al Matrooshi who is ready to go to space is a significant milestone, said Williams who has accumulated a total of 322 days in space, ranking her as the second woman with the longest US space mission duration in history. "I think just picking her is a huge step because then little girls in this country and the region can see themselves stepping in her footsteps and doing it."

### Training UAE astronauts

"I think Nora has an NBL run coming up and then I will help work with her in the near future, maybe by the end of November."

NBL is Nasa's Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory where astronauts are trained especially for their future spacewalks.

Williams shared her positive experiences with UAE astronauts Hazzaa Al Mansoori and Sultan Al Neyadi, having met them during their training in



■ Sunita Williams with school children during the 42nd Sharjah International Book Fair, at Expo Centre Sharjah yesterday.

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**Sunita Williams**  
Astronaut

Russia. She commended their dedication and expressed her delight at seeing them join the astronaut community.

She recalled Al Mansoori telling her about watching her video of getting into the ISS. "It was pretty humbling to hear that."

She said all four UAE astronauts including Mohammad Al Mulla are "integrated in all aspects of what our astronaut corps is doing. So we bump into them all the time, just as friends and colleagues as well as helping them train.

"Recently, Hazzaa and I did some preparation studies on how to transfer cargo on the moon and also did some underwater diving in California to imitate what we are going to do on the moon. I have had some great interactions with all four of them and look forward to Nora Al Matrooshi and Mohammad Al Mulla flying."

In her second session at SIBF tonight, Williams will be joined by Al Mansoori.

### Women in space

Williams noted that having both men and women in space programmes brings diverse perspectives, making the team more balanced and effective. "Some people joke around that the boys keep the station (International Space Station) a little bit cleaner when the women are up there," she said, laughing. When asked about the major challenges women astronauts face in space, Williams acknowledged that female astronauts often do not have the opportunity to share their experiences with other women in space.