



Jury report at the presentation of the 2026 Aletta Jacobs Prize to Elanor Boekholt-O'Sullivan

Marie-José van Tol, 6 March 2026

“This isn’t right. This isn’t equal. This isn’t the right I should have.” #NotMyRight is the theme of this year’s International Women’s Day, 2026. International Women’s Day is celebrated worldwide on 8 March, this coming Sunday, and is the reason why we are gathered here today, on a more practical weekday. Coincidentally, 8 March is also the anniversary of Aletta Jacobs’s PhD, as she was awarded her doctorate at this university on this date in 1879. Aletta Jacobs was the first woman in the Netherlands to officially study at university, graduate in medicine and obtain a PhD, and the first woman to open a medical practice. An icon of this university, but also of the international women’s movement and emancipation. An icon who fought tirelessly for women’s suffrage and who deserves to be remembered so that she can continue to inspire and encourage others. And that is what the University of Groningen has been doing since 1990 by awarding a prize that bears her name: the Aletta Jacobs Prize.

“This isn’t right. This isn’t equal. These are words Aletta Jacobs might well have spoken. But they could just as easily have been the words of the winner of the 2026 Aletta Jacobs Prize.” This year, the jury of the Aletta Jacobs Prize nominated Elanor Boekholt-O’Sullivan with great conviction, in recognition of her inspiring commitment to providing women within the defence sector and in peace processes with space and security, so that things can be right and equality can be achieved.

Boekholt-O’Sullivan was born in Ireland and moved to the Netherlands at the age of two. Her career is characterised by a remarkable pragmatism: doing what is necessary. She did not, for instance, embark on her impressive career in the armed forces out of conviction. She was primarily looking for a job to stand on her own two feet. That turned out to be a sergeant in the Air Force. The conviction followed. After that, she again did what was necessary to keep moving forward: doing a good job and ensuring she could continue her military training at the Royal Military Academy.

She went on to hold a number of impressive military posts, such as commander of an air base – the first woman to hold this position and the second person to do so who was not a pilot – and commander of Defence's Cyber Commando, rising through the ranks within the Ministry of Defence to become a three-star general, again as the first woman to do so. In these roles, she became aware of the unequal treatment of women in the Ministry of Defence and took action to address it. In 2023, she was named Top Woman of the Year by the Top Woman of the Year Foundation, and in 2025 she

received the ministerial Francien de Zeeuw Medal for her contributions to achieving equality between women and men at the Ministry of Defence. We are honoured that she will also be receiving the Aletta Jacobs Prize today.

When selecting the laureate, the jury of the Aletta Jacobs Prize applies the following criteria:

- the laureate is a woman
- she has made a significant contribution to the cause of women's emancipation at a national or international level
- she serves as a role model, preferably in a field not traditionally associated with women
- she is aware of the role her gender has played in her career or she plays a pioneering role in the field of women's emancipation
- she has a connection to a university or has an academic background.

That last criterion has traditionally often been interpreted as having completed an academic degree, but the jury applied it flexibly. Boekholt-O'Sullivan completed a vocational course at an institution that also offers academic programmes. We felt that constituted a sufficient connection. And to be honest, as a jury, we found it the least interesting criterion. We found it far more interesting and significant that her commitment to the position of women did not logically stem from her role or remit at all. She took on a pioneering role – often a thankless one – in an environment where women are not the norm, are at a disadvantage, and are sometimes explicitly unwelcome.

Although of secondary importance, we also thought it fitting not to award the prize to a politician or stateswoman. We reasoned that the fight for equal standing for non-normative groups can also be waged in other spheres of public life and deserves the spotlight too.

So the fact that the award would go to someone holding the rank of lieutenant-general and serving as Deputy Director-General for Policy at the Ministry of Defence was what we liked about our choice. Little did we know. And now we may address the laureate as “Your Excellency, Minister for Housing and Spatial Planning”. From a top military officer to a top civil servant. It makes no difference to our motivation. She receives this prestigious award because of her commitment to creating space and safety for women, both within the Ministry of Defence and beyond.

Space has always been the common thread running through Boekholt-O'Sullivan's professional life. She identified where the bottlenecks lay and created space, or waited for space to be created. Sometimes quite literally, for example, for breasts in the flak jacket. Breasts, after all, are not part of the standard equipment for men, as the

reference man dictates. The reference man is the model that serves as the standard in many designs, procedures and healthcare, but which does not fit many men either. Boekholt-O'Sullivan's argument: "It is time for the reference man to retire". And that is why she is committed to appropriate equipment for everyone: a flak jacket that fits women and thus offers women just as much protection in combat situations as the reference man jacket offers most men. And also: fitting backpacks, physical tests and accommodation. Not equal treatment of all men and women, but equitable treatment of everyone. She states: "We must stop trying to make women fit into a system that was never designed for them".

She is principled, steadfast, visionary and realistic in this regard. For what follows her statement "we must stop trying to make women fit into a system that was never designed for them" is this: "Because a strong armed forces is indispensable. More men: yes, but also many more women. Not 'because we have to', but because we cannot do without them". And in the meantime, space is being created for everyone to find their place and use their talents for what is needed.

In addition to equal conditions for carrying out work within the defence sector, Boekholt-O'Sullivan also speaks out emphatically in favour of involving women in peace processes. She did so, for example, on 8 March 2025 in a video message addressed to the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM), in which she called for the vigorous implementation of UN Resolution 1325. This resolution, adopted by the UN Security Council in 2000, states that women must have a full and equal say in peace negotiations and must be better protected against violence before, during and after conflict situations. The jury considered it important to emphasise the essential role that women must play in sustainable peace and stability by contributing unique perspectives and solutions. Or, as Boekholt-O'Sullivan puts it: "Inclusion is not a luxury, it is a strategic necessity; our security depends on it".

The jury of the Aletta Jacobs Prize is impressed by what Boekholt-O'Sullivan has achieved and how she goes about it: *Gewapend met Gevoel*. And the English translation of her recently published book bearing this title is perhaps even more fitting: "Armed with Sensitivity". No shouting, but listening and identifying where there is room for manoeuvre to expand the space for equality. Holding fast and using her position to that end. And that, too, is what is so admirable about this winner. For her, an award is not a destination, but a mission. She will therefore use the prize to further the work that needs to be done: protecting the safety of women wherever they may be. For that is the right that women should have in every place and in every space.

With this award, we express our gratitude and admiration for the courageous and often thankless work. We hope that this award encourages the continued creation of space and protection. And that is also a call to all of you. Because no one can do this alone.