



**Opening remarks and welcome address at the presentation of the 2026 Aletta Jacobs Prize to Elanor Boekholt - O'Sullivan by Jacquélien Scherpen, Rector Magnificus of the University of Groningen 6 March 2026**

Ladies and gentlemen, Your Excellencies, family and friends of the laureate, students and colleagues.

Today, on behalf of the University of Groningen, I am presenting an award to a woman who has meant – and continues to mean – a great deal to the emancipation of women and girls. We are presenting this award not only to honour her, but also because her work inspires us and her example helps us to move forward.

The University of Groningen has been awarding the Aletta Jacobs Prize since 1990 because we believe it is important to encourage female talent; we want female staff to feel seen and supported; and to emphasise that role models matter.

This conviction goes back to Aletta Jacobs herself: the first female student in the Netherlands at the University of Groningen. She sought permission to study at a time when women did not have this right. This opportunity was granted to her, albeit with the necessary hurdles. And she seized that opportunity! Not only for herself, but also for many other women who went on to study at university after her.

De University of Groningen is proud of its legacy!

- Proud of its first female professor, Jantina Tammes;
- Proud of its Diversity and Inclusion Officer;
- Proud of the many colleagues who work hard every day to create an inclusive university;
- And proud of the fact that it was the first university in the Netherlands to launch the Rosalind Franklin Fellows, of which we now have almost a hundred (100).

In addition, the University of Groningen now has more than forty (40) Aletta Jacobs Chairs. These are chairs that are not merely named after a person, but which contribute to the visibility of women in academia, career progression and change.

Why is this necessary?

- Because the world is showing us that hard-won rights cannot be taken for granted;
- Because there are countries where abortion is – once again – being banned;

- Because online figures such as Andrew Tate influence how young men view women;
- Because traditional gender roles, such as the so-called 'tradwives', are gaining ground once again. The message of these influencers is at odds with the vast amounts of money they earn, but that is beside the point.

Because the safety of women and girls around the world continues to be under threat.

That is precisely why this award is not merely a ceremonial occasion, but also a clear message: a signal that women's empowerment continues to demand attention.

This year, Elanor Boekholt - O'Sullivan receives the Aletta Jacobs Prize. She is being recognised for her commitment and courageous dedication to creating a culture of inclusivity and safety for women within the Ministry of Defence, and for her efforts to actively involve women in peace processes. Not a simple task!

Working on safety and inclusion at the Ministry of Defence requires guts, perseverance and the ability to initiate change(s) in an environment that does not always move with you.

Elanor has taken on this pioneering role. She has not only spoken about change, but has also made a tangible contribution to fostering a culture in which women feel safer and are better heard in a world where conflicts are on the rise, where wars break out and persist

and where women are still under-represented at the negotiating table, this work is of great significance. Peace requires inclusivity. Peace requires security. Peace requires the involvement of women.

In this regard, Elanor has proved to be a role model for women in the Ministry of Defence, students and young professionals.

The presentation of the Aletta Jacobs Prize also marks a new beginning, something we were not yet aware of when the prize was announced. Since last week, Elanor has been Minister for Housing and Spatial Planning.

Today marks the launch of the 'Actie Aletta' project. The UG is honoured that this important initiative has been named after the first female student at the University of Groningen.

Over the next two years, this project will draw attention to women's freedom and safety through initiatives such as a lecture tour visiting all major university cities.

In each city, the theme of security will be approached from a specific angle that suits that city's profile. Discussions will be organised in collaboration with mayors, guest speakers, educational institutions and the Ministry of Defence. Students from university-level education, higher vocational education and secondary vocational education are expressly invited to contribute their ideas on potential solutions.

The tour is more than just knowledge-sharing. It is a call to take responsibility, a complement to existing research and plans, and an invitation to work together on structural improvement.

Today we honour a woman who shows what is possible. Tomorrow the conversation will continue in other cities – with different voices, but with the same core message.

The safety of women and girls is not a precondition. It is a foundation. For freedom. For education. For development. For peace. Let that be the common thread that unites us!