

Speech delivered at the presentation of the Aletta Jacobs Prize by Lieutenant-General (retired) and Minister for Housing and Spatial Planning Elanor Boekholt-O'Sullivan, on Friday 6 March 2026 in Groningen.

Thank you all. Thank you for this special prize. And thank you for the wonderful citation that accompanies it. Your words move me deeply. And they strengthen my conviction that this prize is a mission. That is why I dedicate this prize to something that touches me deeply: the freedom and safety of women in the Netherlands.

Last summer, the Netherlands was shocked by the death of seventeen-year-old Lisa, who was attacked on her way home at night and lost her life. We must not forget her name. And her death must not lead to resignation. Because too many women still have to constantly take insecurity into account. Adjusting their route. Their keys already in hand. Always on the alert as darkness falls. Not because they want to. But because they feel they need to.

I am not standing here today merely as a retired Lieutenant-General and as a Minister. I am also standing here as a woman; as a mother, as a friend. As someone who believes that safety is not an abstract concept, but something you must ensure every day. At my previous employer, the Ministry of Defence, we have the daily roll call. A seemingly simple moment. But one of great significance. A moment when everyone gathers:

Is everyone here? Is everyone all right? And can everyone do what is asked of them?

A roll call is not a formality. It is a duty of care. It is responsibility. It is safety. And that is precisely why I am asking a different question today: Who are we actually holding roll call for in the Netherlands? Who is actually present? And who is missing? Not because they do not want to be part of society, but because the space feels unsafe. Because borders are not being guarded. Because the system does not work for them.

When I was young, I always stood up for the person who was excluded in the school playground. For the one who was the weakest. That came at a price. The popular crowd dropped me. I no longer belonged. I learnt something there that has always stayed with me: standing up for someone else has consequences. It can mean loneliness. Rejection. Doubt.

And yet I knew even then: looking the other way was not an option for me. You can go through life without really looking around you. Focused on yourself. Your own path. But the moment you do look – and act – something changes. Then you no longer automatically think: 'it won't be that bad', or 'it'll be alright'. Then you feel: this isn't right. I've taken that compass with me. Into my life. And into my work.

I joined the Ministry of Defence because I wanted to contribute to a world where we treat one another with humanity and dignity. That is why I have worked at this wonderful organisation for over thirty years. The Ministry of Defence's motto is: we

protect what is dear to us. That applies just as much within the borders of your own country or within your own organisation. Within your own unit, your own team. At every level.

During a deployment in Afghanistan, this became painfully clear to me. I was working there in an international environment. With professional colleagues, most of whom were highly disciplined and dedicated. And yet I saw how a female colleague was being systematically harassed. It started small. A hand on an arm. Too much eye contact. A so-called joke. It got worse and worse. Until a moment when he grabbed a lighter and singed the hairs on her arm. Supposedly as a joke.

She said nothing. She froze. As so many people do when their boundaries are repeatedly crossed. I looked around. Did others see this too? Yes. But nobody moved. And then I knew: if nobody intervenes, this will continue. I went to her manager. I explained what was happening. That this wasn't a cultural difference or a misunderstanding. But that it was nothing less than harassment. Her manager's initial reaction was lukewarm. Polite, but evasive. But that's not who I am. Not then, and not now.

I took it further up the chain. And that very same day, action was taken. The military police were called in. The man in question was sent back. What happened next was telling. The camp was abuzz. Some thought it was over the top. Others wondered if she hadn't provoked it. But for her, that no longer mattered. The line had been drawn. She could do her job again. Without having to hide. Without being afraid. That was the crux of it. Not that someone was sent away, but that someone could stay. I still carry that lesson with me.

Safety isn't just about reacting when things go wrong. It's about preventing people from conforming, shrinking back or keeping quiet. And that brings me to the Netherlands.

I am shocked by the figures. By the stories. The violence. Once every eight days, a woman is murdered in the Netherlands. Often by someone who knows her. Two in three girls and young women aged between 12 and 25 have been harassed on the street. And nearly 70 per cent of women feel structurally unsafe in public spaces. More than 50% of women have experienced physical sexual misconduct: groping, sexual assault, rape.

These are not isolated incidents. These are not peripheral phenomena. To quote the actress Soundos El Ahmadi: 'This is not an opinion, these are hard, cold facts'. And I say: this is a systemic problem. And perhaps we think this is a modern phenomenon. That we are only just beginning to see it now. But anyone who reads history sees something different.

In her memoirs, Aletta Jacobs described an experience from her early days as a GP in Amsterdam. Every evening, after dinner, she would walk back from her parents' house to her own home. And there was a man who kept following her. One evening, things

went wrong. He grabbed her ‘in an offensive manner’, right in the middle of the street. Right under the nose of a police officer, no less. Aletta walked up to the officer, seeking protection. But instead, she was told: ‘Stay at home in the evenings, then you won’t be bothered on the street.’ More than a hundred years ago. And yet we still recognise it today. The message that women simply have to adapt. That they must change their behaviour. That they must avoid the risk. That it is their fault.

Last year, a female colleague called me. It was late. She was standing outside on the square adjacent to the House of Representatives and the Ministry of Defence. “Your lights are on,” she said. “Can I come over to you?” She had been touched by someone who shouldn’t have touched her. And what was the first thing she said? “It must have been my fault. My skirt was perhaps too short.” That touches me deeply. Women should not blame themselves for behaviour that should never have taken place.

Sometimes people think the solution is simple. More lighting. More cameras. More warnings. More self-defence workshops. But if you only light up the cycle path without tackling the system, little will change. This is not a simple problem. It is a complex, persistent issue. It happens at home. At school. In nightlife. In the workplace. Online. In policy.

And also in my new role as Minister for Spatial Planning and Housing. Women’s safety is not just a criminal or social issue. It is also an issue of spatial planning and housing. Where we build homes. How we design neighbourhoods. Whether there is still light and life on the streets in the evening. Whether a station is well-organised, or a bus stop deserted. A poorly lit street increases risks. A neighbourhood without amenities becomes quiet and vulnerable. A woman who wants to escape an unsafe home situation but cannot find affordable housing remains trapped longer than necessary.

And yes, men are very much part of the solution. I’m not against men. On the contrary. My son once said to me: “Now that I’m looking through your eyes, I see what you see. I’d never really realised that before.” That is where change begins. With seeing. With acknowledging. With taking responsibility. And that is why I am dedicating this award to Actie Aletta. Today marks the start of that initiative. I am therefore delighted that State Secretary Tielen is here today, in her capacity as the minister responsible for women’s emancipation. Thank you for that.

Together with, amongst others, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, universities, the Association of Dutch Municipalities, the Government Commissioner on sexual misconduct and sexual violence, and the ‘We claim the night’ movement, we are organising a lecture tour across sixteen university cities. In each city, one question takes centre stage: how can we prevent unsafe situations and behaviour towards women? Because all too often, we only react once things have already gone wrong. Prevention means: recognising warning signs sooner. Setting boundaries sooner. Breaking patterns *before* they cause harm.

In each city, we seek the answers from a different perspective, tailored to that city's knowledge and expertise, ranging from urban planning and social safety to law, enforcement, technology and cultural change. We will bring together the insights and recommendations that emerge from this at the end of the tour, symbolically in Amsterdam, at The Night Watch, with the aim of actually turning them into change.

Ladies and gentlemen, insecurity is like a dark alley: as a society, we must light the lantern. We do not need to change women. We must illuminate the environment. Not by one person alone. But together. Men and women. And sometimes that means: standing up. Speaking to someone. Not looking away. And standing by the victim. As an ally. Until it is safe again.

That is not always easy. Standing up for someone else has consequences. But looking away is not an option as far as I am concerned. Because safety arises where people feel responsible. Where we have a roll call stock and honestly look at who is missing. I do not claim the night for women alone. I claim it for a society that takes itself seriously.

And although I must now step back from this programme, I will not let go of this conviction. Where women's safety and social housing intersect, where women's safety and spatial planning intersect, I will – in the Cabinet, to my civil servants and anywhere else – always ask the question: has women's safety truly been taken into account here?

Thank you.