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**Opening speech 8 March 2022 at the Award Ceremony of the Aletta Jacobs Prize to Rebecca Gomperts, by Cisca Wijmenga, Rector Magnificus of the University of Groningen**

Dear Rebecca Gomperts, family and friends, members of the Board, previous recipients of the Aletta Jacobs Prize, today's speakers, Brigit Toebes and Hazal Atay, the musicians of the Prince Claus Conservatoire, students and staff of the University of Groningen, and all other guests joining us today,

Welcome to this special celebration in our beautiful Aula. It is an absolute pleasure to be able to stand here today on this rostrum, and look out across your faces full of joy and expectation. I have been looking forward to this moment for a very long time.

In 2020, the presentation of the Aletta Jacobs Prize to Khadija Arib was the last major event to be held at the University of Groningen, and now – exactly two years later – this ceremony is the first event to go ahead without restrictive coronavirus measures. Almost as though the virus understood the importance of the Aletta Jacobs Prize. It truly is wonderful to be able to welcome you all here today; your attendance really does justice to the extraordinary significance of this ceremony.

If today is your first visit to our Aula, I would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to the beautiful memorial windows on your left-hand side. And especially to the woman wearing the red robe, with her arm outstretched. To the pioneer, and to the reason why we are all gathered here in this Aula this afternoon: Aletta Jacobs.

Because on this day, on International Women's Day, the University of Groningen traditionally awards its Aletta Jacobs Prize once every two years. In doing so, the University honours women who make exceptional contributions to the field of emancipation. The fact that this year's recipient is fighting for women's health rights in the same passionate and inspiring way that Aletta Jacobs did in her day makes this occasion all the more special.

It is therefore a great honour for me to be able to officially present the certificate for this outstanding achievement to you, Rebecca Gomperts, for your persistent fight for abortion rights and access to safe and legal abortion for women all over the world. The impact of your efforts should not be underestimated. Throughout the world, we are still seeing highly contradictory developments on this issue: from relaxations, such as those announced a fortnight ago in Columbia, to stricter abortion laws in various American states.

As we saw from last month's parliamentary debates and proposed changes to the law, this battle is far from over in the Netherlands of today. More than two-thirds of the House of Representatives voted in favour of the proposal to abolish the compulsory five-day reflection period prior to an abortion. A heavy-handed rule that, even when the Abortion Act was first introduced, was described by opponents as being unnecessarily patronising.

And yet it has taken no fewer than forty years to do away with the period of reflection. Although the Senate is expected to approve the bill in the near future, let us not rejoice too soon. What's more, the House only recently held its first debate on improving access to the abortion pill through general practitioners – once again demonstrating that the road that the woman pictured in that stained-glass window paved for us is by no means nearing its end. Aletta Jacobs showed us the way, but we are not there yet.

Fortunately, we have modern-day Alettas to carry the baton – like our brilliant recipient today, Rebecca Gomperts. And as we experienced last night in an inspiring College Tour

But I would also like to take a moment to mention some of our less prominent advocates. In my preparations for this ceremony, I read the summary of the thesis entitled '[Abortion, health and gender stereotypes](#)', written by our since graduated PhD student Lucia Berro Pizarrossa. Three years ago, she concluded that the prevailing legal approach to abortion is fundamentally anti-abortion. Even in liberal democracies, women may only undergo abortions with the consent of the state apparatus, and with the mandatory involvement of one or more doctors and other professionals. Berro Pizarrossa concluded that, in a sense, abortion is always considered 'wrong' in social discourse.

Berro Pizarrossa was supervised by two professors from our Faculty of Law: Marcel Brus and Brigit Toebes, who will be our first speaker today. Toebes, Professor of Health Law in an International Perspective, will be giving a lecture on 'Abortion as a Human Right'.

She will be followed by Hazal Atay, outreach coordinator at Women on Web, who will be talking to us about this online support service, which was founded by Rebecca Gomperts, for women in countries where safe abortion options are not available. The title of her speech is: 'Making Waves, Blowing Wind: Ensuring Safe Abortion Access Worldwide'.

Then it will be time for some music. Diana Acosta Cruz from the Prince Claus Conservatoire will be performing *Thin Air* by Calliope Tsoupaki. Rebecca selected this piece as it was composed as an ode to compassion and solidarity, which is what Rebecca's work is also about, after all. After hearing this piece, I will officially present the 2022 Aletta Jacobs Prize to this year's winner. But first, I will give the floor to Brigit Toebes.