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Jury report Aletta Jacobs Prize 2022, by Janka Stoker, Chair of the Jury

'Fighting for what is right makes life worth living,' said Aletta Jacobs in 1921. Those words apply to all previous winners but are particularly fitting for today's winner. This year's jury has emphatically decided to award the 2022 Aletta Jacobs Prize to Rebecca Gomperts, founder of Women on Waves, Women on Web, and Aid Access.

Rebecca Gomperts was born in Suriname; from the age of three, she was raised in the Netherlands, in Vlissingen. She studied medicine and fine arts, completed a nautical training programme, and pursued a Master's degree in Public Policy at Princeton University in the US. In 2014, she obtained her PhD from the Karolinska Institutet in Sweden with her thesis entitled 'Task shifting in the provision of medical abortion'.

She first became aware of the importance of having access to safe and legal abortions during her clerkships in African countries, where she worked with women with unwanted pregnancies. Once she had qualified as a doctor, she went on to work at abortion clinics in the Netherlands and for Greenpeace. With Greenpeace, she sailed to South America, where she heard many harrowing stories of women suffering the consequences of unwanted pregnancies and the lack of access to safe and legal abortions. This inspired her to launch Women on Waves in 1999.

On the ship 'Aurora', which quickly became known as the 'abortion ship', she was able to offer abortions outside the territorial waters of countries where abortion was illegal. She faced a tremendous amount of resistance in many countries and there were threats, protests, and campaigns to prevent the boat from docking anywhere. Despite this resistance, the campaigns were a resounding success. Women on Waves made headlines around the world and put the issue of abortion high on the political agenda in many countries. In 2005, Gomperts founded Women on Web, an organization that makes it easier to access contraception and safe abortion services online. In 2020, TIME magazine named her one of the 100 most influential people in the world, calling her a 'beacon of hope' in these uncertain times.

The jury's criteria

The jury of the Aletta Jacobs Prize uses the following criteria to select the winner:

- The winner must be a woman.
- She must have performed outstanding work at national or international level in the field of emancipation.
- She must lead by example, preferably in a non-traditional discipline for women.
- She must be aware of the role that her gender has played in her career, or she must be a pioneer in the field of emancipation.
- She must be connected to a university or be academically educated.

Reasons for our choice

Rebecca Gomperts is being awarded the Aletta Jacobs Prize for her fight for abortion rights and access to safe and legal abortions for women worldwide. The jury commends Rebecca Gomperts for

her remarkable fight for these rights and for the courageous way in which she tirelessly champions women all over the world.

Because it was, and is, a fight that is not without danger. As we saw in the documentary 'Vessel', Gomperts has been greeted with hostility in several countries. And yet, by being controversial, using her creativity, and not being afraid of danger, she has succeeded in putting abortion high on the political agenda in many countries.

'But the firm belief that the cause for which I was fighting was worth all my efforts; the profound awareness that I was not only relieving individual suffering, but also furthering a larger social cause, gave me the strength to persevere down the path I had taken.' These words spoken by Aletta Jacobs about her fight for contraception could quite easily have been about Gomperts. And so, in this Aletta Year, during which we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of Aletta Jacobs commencing her studies at the University of Groningen, there is no winner who has more in common with Aletta than Rebecca Gomperts: both doctors, both activists, both not afraid to act against authority, and both fearlessly fighting for the interests of women in difficult circumstances.

Just as Aletta Jacobs devoted years of her life to helping women in the working-class neighbourhoods of Amsterdam who had no access to medical care and education, Rebecca helps women in Amsterdam and all over the world by providing information, courses, and medication. And just as Aletta introduced the diaphragm as a contraceptive, thereby giving women a choice, Rebecca introduced the abortion pill to many countries as a safe and effective means of birth control.

Worldwide, almost one in three pregnancies ends in abortion, but access to safe abortions is becoming increasingly difficult in many countries. Twenty-five per cent of the world's population live in countries with very strict abortion laws; consequently, more than 20 million women undergo unsafe abortions every year. Thousands of women die every year following unsafe abortions. In many countries, abortion laws are becoming increasingly strict – just think of some states in the US, or of China, where access to abortion may be abolished altogether due to the country's rapidly ageing population.

Fortunately, there is some good news in the Netherlands: in early February, the House of Representatives passed a bill to abolish the compulsory five-day reflection period for abortions. The bill on the 'abortion pill' will also be discussed in the near future: this bill is expected to make it possible for general practitioners to provide medication to terminate a pregnancy in its early stages.

But we still have a long way to go. In the Netherlands, abortion is still listed in the Criminal Code. So, Gomperts' fight goes on. In her ideal world, women will not need to see a doctor to get an abortion pill; instead, they should be able to obtain one without a prescription from a pharmacy or a drugstore. The resources required for ensuring that women can have a safe abortion on their own terms are now available.

Rebecca Gomperts sees it as her duty to make clear that a woman's right to decide over her own body is a basic human right. As a twenty-first-century Aletta, she is courageously and persistently committed to women's health rights. And, like Dr Jacobs, she is succeeding in making the world better and safer for women. We could not have wished for a more appropriate winner in this Aletta Year!