



PEOPLE



# BREAKING BOUNDARIES

## THE LIFE OF ALETTA JACOBS

In 1854, the Netherlands was a country where, like in many other places worldwide, women did not possess the right to vote and were prohibited from attending university. When a little girl named Aletta Henriëtte Jacobs was born on February 9th of that year, in the village of Sappemeer in Groningen province, her parents had no idea that she would be the one to help change these things and challenge many more. Today, Aletta Jacobs is celebrated as the first woman to officially attend a Dutch university and obtain a doctorate. She was a fighter for women's rights and a suffrage activist. Jacobs was a leader in the Netherlands but also active internationally in various women's movements. Her life and accomplishments are a testament to the power of unwavering conviction, tenacity and the pursuit of justice – values that continue to resonate in today's ongoing fight for gender equality. To encapsulate her entire legacy in one article presents a considerable challenge, yet I endeavor to spotlight its most noteworthy aspects.

Aletta Jacobs was the eighth child in a Jewish middle-class family of eleven children. Her father, Abraham Jacobs, was a doctor, and her mother, Anna de Jongh, worked diligently to care for the large family. They fostered an intellectual environment, encouraged their children to nurture their curiosity and educated them from an early age in many aspects of life, including finances. Jacobs expressed the wish to become a doctor like her father, oblivious to the fact that it was difficult (if not impossible) for a woman to achieve that. In her *Memoirs* (1924), she wrote: "At the age of six, I solemnly announced that I wanted to be a doctor, just like Dad and Julius (her brother). At that point, I never imagined that this would be a particularly difficult choice for a girl. Why should it have been? At home, the boys and the girls were treated the same." After completing elementary school, the only path available was attending a finishing school designed to prepare women for societal roles. Jacobs attended such a school for two weeks before deeming it "completely idiotic" and leaving it in favor of homeschooling. Young Aletta suffered greatly during this period, feeling she was condemned to a meaningless life that would bring her no joy. In 1869, upon learning that a woman had taken the admissions examination for a pharmacist's assistant course, Jacobs decided to do the same herself. She was encouraged by a family friend, the hygienist Levy Ali Cohen. She studied with the help of her father, her brother Sam and Cohen, and in 1870, she passed the exam. But Jacobs wanted more. Driven by her aspiration to become a doctor, she resolved to do everything in her power to fulfill that dream. After writing in

secret to Prime Minister Johan Rudolph Thorbecke, requesting to be allowed to attend the medical courses at university, she was allowed a probationary period at Groningen University. This was not without drama, as Thorbecke sent letters to her father (instead of replying to her) demanding further explanation for such a daring request. Jacobs was only seventeen years old, and her success was met with hesitation, even from her family. Those around her were concerned about the immense pressure she was under. Her conduct and grades during the probationary period were crucial not only for her, but also for all women. It implied the possibility of a future for them in higher education. In 1872, after a few more efforts, petitions and a lot of studying, she was granted permanent admission to medical school. Jacobs wrote history when she graduated in 1879, obtaining a medical doctorate and becoming famous in the Netherlands, with news of her graduation reaching the national press. It was this fame that brought the Dutch radical and feminist Carel Victor Gerritsen into her life, the man who would later become her husband. Their correspondence began after he had sent her a letter congratulating her for her achievements.

Jacobs's academic journey was fraught with challenges, and by the age of twenty-five, she had already achieved a lot for a woman of her time. But that was just the beginning of her incredible journey. During the rest of her life, she would encounter numerous obstacles and struggles as she continued to defy and challenge societal norms.

Having broken through the gender barrier in academia, Dr. Aletta Jacobs then proceeded to forge a path in the medical profession. Following graduation, she ventured to London to continue her studies by observing women physicians at London hospitals, including Great Ormond Street Hospital, London School of Medicine for Women, and the New Hospital for Women. There, she met the first female medical practitioner in England, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, and her sister, Millicent Garrett Fawcett. She was introduced to this group of women doctors by Carel Victor Gerritsen, who continued to be a friend and a big supporter of her work. During her stay in London, Jacobs not only expanded her medical understanding, but also engaged with the women's suffrage movement and other social issues like birth control.

In September 1879, she returned to the Netherlands and started a medical practice on Herengracht in Amsterdam. Her gender restricted her to treating only women and children. She quickly became acquainted with the health issues that working-class women were facing due to poor living and working conditions, and she helped guide numerous pregnancies. Jacobs established a free clinic

providing treatment for women while also educating them on matters of hygiene and childcare. Seeing the toll repeated pregnancies took on women's health, she initiated conversations about contraception, convinced it could ease the economic strain of large families. She promoted the Mensinga pessary (a diaphragm) as a form of birth control, educated women on how to use it and wrote articles about it. In an era when discussing sex publicly was scandalous, she approached sex education and birth control unreservedly and from a medical perspective. While her ideas were met with hope by many women (she even received letters from women in the UK requesting a pessary), she also faced criticism from society. She was accused – even by fellow physicians – of advocating extramarital relationships and disrupting the divine order. However, such resistance didn't deter Jacobs from disseminating information about the pessary to as many women as possible. Jacobs's medical career was characterized by her bold defiance of societal norms, seamlessly interweaving her advocacy for women's rights into her medical practice. Her pioneering work in promoting birth control undoubtedly marked a profound advancement for women's health, proving her not only an outstanding physician, but also a fearless advocate for women.

Jacobs's commitment to advocating for women's rights extended far beyond the realm of medicine. In 1883, upon discovering that the law did not explicitly ban women from voting, she began her campaign for women's suffrage. With her characteristic boldness, she wrote to the mayor of Amsterdam to inquire why she had not received a voting ballot, only to hear that, in order to be given voting rights, she would have to challenge whether women were entitled to full citizenship. Jacobs made an appeal to the Amsterdam District Court, and later to the Supreme Court, which both concluded that women were not citizens (not even those who were working and paying taxes, as she did). To label the outcome as disappointing would be a profound understatement. The endeavor seemingly dealt a blow to women's rights when, consequent to her appeal, laws were revised to specifically affiliate the term 'male' with 'Dutch citizen' wherever suffrage was discussed. Despite these obstacles, Jacobs never wavered in her commitment to the cause, continuously challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for change. In 1894, she founded the Association for Women's Suffrage (*Vereeniging voor Vrouwenkiesrecht*) and continued to fight for women's right to vote, supported by Carel Victor Gerritsen.

Jacobs was a rebel in her personal life as well. She was opposed to marriage and wanted to remain independent, but eventually married Gerritsen when they decided to have a child. They lived apart for a

few years before opting for cohabitation. Uncommon for her time, she chose to retain her maiden name post-marriage and refused to say in her marriage vows that she would 'obey' her husband, considering this an insult to women in a modern society.

Years of activism followed. Jacobs and her husband joined the Neo-Malthusian League of Holland, advocating for public education on family planning and championing improvements in social and working conditions for the working class.

In 1903, Jacobs retired from her medical practice to devote her full attention to activist work. She traveled around the world – at first with her husband at later alone – to promote their ideas and inspire others in their fight for human rights. In order to fund her travels, she wrote articles for magazines about the causes she was fighting for and related her journeys to Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*. Unfortunately, in her personal life, Jacobs suffered big losses. Her only child passed away a day after birth, and she lost her husband to cancer in 1905. She managed to recover and continued her work, attending congresses and conferences and fighting for change.

With the onset of World War I, Jacobs immersed herself in the women's peace movement, standing firmly against the horrors of war. She attended the International Women's Congress in The Hague, playing a key role in facilitating the event and becoming the vice president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

Her years of activism paid off when, in 1918, women were granted voting rights in the Netherlands. Further reforms regarding the working conditions for women came as a result of her (and other activists') tireless work. Numerous birth control clinics were established in Europe and the United States by women who admired her and followed in her footsteps.

In 1919, Jacobs moved from Amsterdam to The Hague and continued her work – including authoring her biography – from there. She served on the board of Voluntary Parenthood League in the United States and continued to attend the conferences of the International Council of Women, International Alliance of Women, and the WILPF until her passing in 1929.

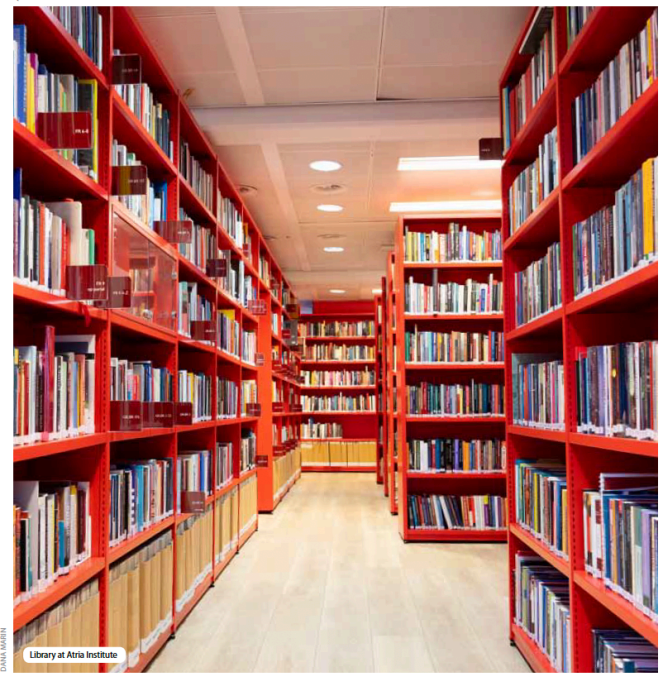
Letta Jacobs left behind an impressive legacy that transcends time and geographical boundaries, as she remains an inspirational figure for progressive movements worldwide. Today, she is remembered as an iconic leader of the women's rights movement and a trailblazer in women's health. Her archive, containing images, objects and documents that show the Dutch and international struggle for women's rights, is included in the UNESCO

Memory of the World Programme. In 2009, she was included in the Canon of the Netherlands (a list of fifty topics to be taught at schools that tell the history of the country). In the Netherlands, Jacobs is celebrated through various academic prizes that bear her name, and her life was adapted into film in 1995: *Het Hoogste Streven* (*The Highest Aspiration*). Between 2009 and 2013, the Atria Institute on gender equality and women's history was known as the Aletta Institute for Women's History, in her honor. Her papers are part of the institute's archive; they were digitized and made available to the public (this includes the letters she received from women

around the world who resonated with her ideals or were writing to request her help).

I would like to close this article with a quote from Jacobs's *Memoirs*: "I am grateful that I have been able to witness the actualization of three factors vital to the improvement of women's lives and happiness. With my support, women's political and economic independence and planned parenthood has become a reality in the Netherlands. Hence, when my time comes, I will feel free to say that I have contributed to making the world I leave a better place for women than the world I entered."

DANA MARIN



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Library at Atria Institute