

Statement by the AFK women's network of peace researchers regarding the chairing of the final plenary session of the AFK-Kolloquium 2017 / EuPRA and AFK Joint Conference

Dear EuPRA Board Members, dear Dr Hendrik Bullens

Maybe you are already aware of the uproar that was caused during the last plenary session of the AFK-Kolloquium 2017 / EuPRA and AFK Joint Conference, especially among the women present. Some saw no other way but to leave the room to express their anger and frustration. Others hung on and tried to think of something to say to give voice to their indignation without simultaneously adding to the time that had already been taken away from the speaker, Nobel Peace Laureate Tawakkol Karman. Spontaneously, we saw no way to stage an appropriate intervention. Today, however, we are writing to you to inform you on our views and to firmly state our indignation. Our hope is that this statement will help to prevent similar occurrences in the future. Ideally, it will also spark further discussion and reflection on the deeper causes of the incident.

Let us briefly recall the situation: The plenary session, which was organized and chaired by Dr Bullens, featured three female speakers, among them Nobel Peace Laureate Tawakkol Karman. This circumstance – the fact that he had assembled three professional women, an ‘all-female panel’ – was repeatedly stressed by Dr Bullens. At the same time, he did not explain how the contributions by the ‘three strong women’ related to one another. There was no common theme or question. It was obvious that he had paid little attention to the thematic preparation of the panel. It was to be enough that it was ‘all-female’, effectively disregarding the speakers’ professionalism and specific expertise.

This degradation reached its outrageous peak after the third and last talk by Tawakkol Karman. Instead of proceeding with the discussion, Dr Bullens called on her husband to come up on the podium. Mohamed Karman had already refused the offer to take a seat on the podium at the very beginning of the session. It was only after repeated calls on him by Dr Bullens that he finally climbed up the stairs and sat with the speakers. He was then asked a question that many in the audience had already felt was coming – although we were still fervently hoping that it would not. But it did come. Dr Bullens asked Mohamed Karman how it felt to be the husband of a ‘strong woman’ in a traditional society. Instead of giving the speakers time to discuss with one another and with the audience, which is common courtesy as well as the usual and accepted academic procedure, Dr Bullens felt it necessary to draw attention to the husband’s experiences and opinions. It is hard (if not impossible) to imagine a situation in which a male speaker would have been treated in the same way. It also seems unlikely that a white European speaker’s husband would have been rewarded a similar degree of attention, had he been present. Instead of allowing Tawakkol Karman to enter into the discussion on her own terms, she was compelled to translate her husband’s answers into English. These answers as well as Mr Karmans overall behaviour, however, spoke of support and admiration for his wife’s work and of awareness of the gendered expectations and discriminations that she has been facing.

We recognize and acknowledge that Dr Bullens’ approach was most likely informed by intentions that he regarded as well-meaning and possibly even empowering. This makes it all the more

necessary to draw attention to the intertwined elements of sexism and racism that played out in his performance as chair of the plenary session. The speakers were reduced to the role of 'strong women' – with little regard for their actual expertise or for their arguments, which would have deserved scrutiny and discussion. In addition, the question to Mr Karman effectively forced him and his wife into the image of an orientalist patriarchy, which they quite obviously rejected and sought to avoid.

On behalf of the AFK women's network of peace researchers, we would like to express our regret and indignation and distance ourselves from the prejudiced treatment of the Nobel Peace Laureate and her co-speakers – and of the Laureate's husband, for that matter. These concerned parties will also receive copies of our statement.

Mechthild Exo and Anne Menzel

AFK women's representatives, on behalf of the AFK women's network of peace researchers

This statement is shared and supported by the AFK board