

Juryrapport

KHMW Proefschriftprijs voor de Maatschappijwetenschappen 2026 – Maatschappijwetenschappen (sociologie, politicologie, antropologie, bestuurskunde)

R. (Ruben) Timmerman, PhD

By Invisible Hands - Work, Exploitation, and the Migrant Division of Labour

Erasmus University Rotterdam, June 2025

From a set of 32 dissertations, each of which was of incredibly high quality, the jury unanimously identified one dissertation that clearly stood out even among this distinguished collection. It is therefore with great pleasure that the jury awards the KHMW Proefschriftprijs voor de Maatschappijwetenschappen to Ruben Timmerman for his PhD thesis “By invisible hands: work, exploitation, and the migrant division of labour”, with which he successfully completed his doctorate on June 5, 2025, at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

The great strength of this book is that it combines micro-ethnographic analyses of the daily work and living conditions of migrant workers with a political-economic analysis of structural developments in labour markets, government policy, and, above all, the important yet dubious role that so-called “supply chains” and intermediaries play in perpetuating exploitative practices.

Timmerman worked full-time for months in the kind of low-wage jobs typically filled by migrants: clearing away debris and materials at construction sites, sorting and packing fruit in a processing plant, and picking orders in distribution centres. He combined this grassroots work and participant observation with analyses of labour market data and “studying up” in the form of in-depth interviews with experts and professionals, including the labour inspectorate, employer organizations, trade unions, and various NGOs. In his fieldwork, he experienced firsthand the fate that awaits many migrant workers at the bottom of the Dutch labour market: underpayment or incorrect compensation, extremely long working hours, unsafe or unsanitary working conditions, a lack of job security, and unyielding supervisors. He was, of course, spared the poor housing and economic precariousness experienced by this group of migrant workers, but he saw plenty of it among his colleagues on the various job sites where he worked.

Delving so deeply into a complex, in many ways tragic, yet also shocking set of economic, social, and policy practices to understand them from the inside requires an extraordinary high degree of commitment, tenacity, consistency, empathy, and professional integrity. But that alone is not enough to produce an award-winning dissertation. Timmerman’s book also demonstrates that he is a gifted analyst and an excellent writer.

This dissertation is therefore not a collection of articles but a traditional monograph, which, according to the committee, has a strong chance of being published in virtually unaltered form by a prominent international academic publisher. The dissertation begins with a clear

introduction, followed by a general theoretical chapter – a so-called “conceptual reorientation” – and a theoretical chapter that explicitly focuses on migrant labour. It then includes a detailed chapter in which ethnography is described and evaluated as an applied method. Timmerman then zooms in on the context of the city of Rotterdam. What follows are three empirical chapters, each devoted to a sector in which he immersed himself: construction, fruit growing, and logistics. The two concluding chapters are a synthesis and a full chapter devoted to the implications of his research. This comprehensive argument is skilfully structured and supported by a tight composition and a crystal-clear style.

“By invisible hands” is an outstanding example of interdisciplinary social science research. Timmerman draws new connections between fields such as migration studies, criminology, and the sociology of work. He not only articulates new scientific insights but also formulates thoughtful and thought-provoking policy implications. In essence: government, do not try to ‘curb’ labour migration, but focus on reducing structural inequalities in the labour market. He has also succeeded in giving this message wings: not only through media appearances for the general public but also in the political and bureaucratic circles of ‘The Hague’. His work is now regularly cited there, including in parliamentary debates. That is a form of impact granted to very few doctoral candidates.

In short, this is a gem and exemplary piece of research, to which we are delighted to award this prestigious KHMW Prize.

Prof. dr. C.Th. (Carolien) van Ham, hoogleraar empirische politicologie Radboud Universiteit
Prof. dr. P. (Paul) 't Hart, lid/vicevoorzitter Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid,
hoogleraar bestuurskunde Universiteit Utrecht
Prof. dr. R. (Renske) Keizer, hoogleraar familiesociologie Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam

De juryvergadering vond plaats via Zoom op 2 april 2026, onder voorzitterschap van KHMW-maatschappelijk lid mr. Y.C.M.T. (Yvonne) van Rooy. Tevens was ter vergadering aanwezig prof. dr. W.B. (Wim) Drees, secretaris geestes- en maatschappijwetenschappen KHMW.