



Jury report

Gender Studies Dissertation Award 2025

Stichting Feministisch Cultuurfonds Gender&wetenschap
Feminist Cultural Fund Gender&knowledge

Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies

Jury 2025

- Lies Wesseling, Maastricht University (chair)
- Benedicta Deogratias, University of Aruba
 - Rosemarie Buikema, Utrecht University
 - Petra Rudolf, Groningen University
 - Liesbeth Lijnzaad, Maastricht University
- Maria Grever, Erasmus University Rotterdam

The jury has received ten submissions defended at universities in the Netherlands between July 2022 and April 2025. Studying these works has left us in an optimistic mood about the future of gender studies. Whatever may jeopardize the field, it is not going to be a lack of talent in the upcoming generation of scholars for sure. In successive meetings, we went from a shortlist of six to a shortlist of three candidates.

We then recruited the winner from the last shortlist. Two other candidates ended ex aequo on the second place.

Aranka Ballering and Antonia Weiss share the second place on the shortlist, as they both received an equal amount of votes.

Aranka Ballering made a significant contribution to raising gender awareness in medical practice with her dissertation *Twists and Turns. Sex and Gender Differences in the Illness Trajectories of Common Somatic Symptoms* (defended on April 3, 2024 at the University of Groningen).

This dissertation explores the role of sex and gender in the medical trajectories of patients manifesting ordinary, common symptoms such as chronic fatigue, persistent headache or loss of appetite from diagnosis up to and including treatment, or the decision to refrain from treatment.

The author analyzes painstakingly how sex and gender make or do not make a difference in each and every step in this trajectory.

This approach takes her way beyond the level of vague generalisations about gender bias in medicine.

The key concepts of sex and gender are defined and operationalized in keeping with the contemporary state of the art in feminist theory, while the empirical basis for the arguments and claims is remarkably broad, based on an impressively broad range of case studies.

The author's approach to gender bias in medicine is original and sophisticated and conveys a keen awareness of the complexity of this material.

The societal implications of this thesis's findings are wide-ranging, because the author's focus is on ordinary symptoms that impact large groups of people.

The author knows how to spell out these implications in the societal valorisation of her findings, witness the game of quartet that she has designed, which is called "Komt een vrouw bij de dokter", A woman goes to the doctor, a plot with many surprising twists and turns.

As said before, Aranka Ballering shares her second place with Antonia Weiss, historian and architect, who produced the dissertation *The City of Nature. Women and the Making of Green Space in Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam and Berlin* (defended January 31, 2025 at the University of Amsterdam), an inquiry into the role and place of women in the creation of green spaces in two eighteenth-century cities.

This dissertation is remarkably well-written, addressing a highly original topic, which is studied over a considerable stretch of time, the long 18th century.

The author combines perspectives from architecture studies, sociology and early modern history in a highly convincing manner.

The author is highly transparent in her selection of historical sources and equally reflexive about the methods chosen.

The author arrives at the well-argued conclusion that the making of history and the making of urban space are closely interconnected.

While this is a historical study, its gender specific approach to the role of nature, park and landscape in urban space also holds contemporary relevance for today's society.

And today's winner is Rodante van der Waal, who wrote a groundbreaking work about obstetric practices called *Birth Justice: From Obstetric Violence to Abolitionist Care* (defended on February 10, 2025 at the University for Humanistic Studies).

This work criticizes contemporary obstetric practice from an international, comparative perspective. The author argues that obstetrics systematically undermines the agency of people giving birth by both over- and under-medicalization.

Giving birth tends to be governed by techno-medical imperatives that dictate, for example, that women have to give birth while lying on their backs so they can be monitored more easily by technical appliances while losing control over their own labor.

Obstetrics is inclined to naturalize and normalize physical interventions which are too often carried without consent of the person giving birth, whose objections are overruled by what the author calls "waiving the dead baby card".

This kind of obstetric violence can also assume the shape of under-medicalization, when requests for sedation are refused, for example. Over-medicalization and under-medicalization have a color according to the author. White women tend to be subjected to over-medicalization, and persons of color to under-medicalization. There is such a thing as 'obstetric racism', witness also the rather painful statistics revealing that black women and babies die significantly more often during or immediately after birth than white women.

Obstetric racism is rooted in assumptions about black women that, for example the assumption that black women are not all that sensitive to pain, that are legacies from colonialism and slavery.

The jury considers this dissertation an outstanding achievement, for several reasons:

- It is strong in theory. The author is closely acquainted with feminist and decolonial theory and mobilizes these frameworks to operationalize the key

concepts of obstetric violence and obstetric racism to conceptualise a non-violent obstetric practice, which she calls “abolitionist care”.

- At the same time, this dissertation is empirically sound. The observations derive from a plenitude of twelve case studies, in which the author cooperates with a broad spectrum of co-authors from the Netherlands and beyond, both academics and obstetric practitioners.
- Such a balance between theoretical framework and empirical grounding is already quite an achievement per se, a feature also witnessed in Aranka Ballering’s work. But what makes this dissertation fairly unique is that the author’s insights have also been shaped by her own practice as an obstetrician. This puts her into an ideal position for generating synergies between obstetric practice and academic research. This manifests in the Dutch version of her dissertation for the general audience, and in her valorisation plan which entails interventions into obstetric training programmes.
- This dissertation is truly interdisciplinary, drawing on both social science and humanities approaches, concepts and theories. Ethnography is combined with philosophical perspectives and close reading from the field of literary studies.
- Finally, this dissertation is not limited at all to the Dutch context. It demonstrates quite convincingly that the naturalization and normalization of obstetric violence is a global problem that does not only manifest in Europe, but also in other parts of the world such as the US or India. And again, collaboration with colleagues is crucial to achieving such a broad international scope, which enhances the urgency of the author’s findings.

To conclude, we feel that this dissertation has the potential to set a standard and to give direction for future work in the field.

For all these reasons, we believe that we have found a worthy winner of this year’s dissertation prize in Rodante van der Waal.