



EUROPE

# Efforts to support the extension of birth leave in the Netherlands

Case study summary

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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif., and Cambridge, UK

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## Learning from the extension of birth leave in the Netherlands

### In 2018 an important legislative breakthrough introduced birth leave for partners of mothers in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is often seen as a progressive country in terms of its stance on social issues, including gender equality. However, until 2019 the entitlement to paternity leave in the Netherlands was only two days. Surprisingly, this was one of the lowest entitlements among EU countries in terms of length and level of compensation.<sup>1,2</sup> This may be partly explained by a dominant ‘motherhood ideology’ in the Netherlands, where mothers are considered as the primary caregivers for children. This has shaped family roles and influenced policymaking in the country, and distinguishes the Netherlands from, for example, Scandinavian countries.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

Despite this, a drastic turn was seen in 2018 with the introduction of the law known as the WIEG<sup>6</sup> – the Dutch word for ‘cradle’. The WIEG established that as of January 2019 partners of mothers in the Netherlands in formal employment are entitled to **five days of fully paid partner leave**, extended to **five weeks of non-transferable partner leave** paid at 70 per cent of normal pay from July 2020 onwards. These entitlements are referred to as birth leave.<sup>7</sup>

### Valuable insights can be gained by looking at the efforts of an alliance that supported the legislative change

In 2015, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Rutgers and WOMEN Inc. formed a

partnership, informally referred to as the ‘strategic parenthood alliance’ (hereafter referred to as the alliance).<sup>8</sup> The alliance partners aimed to advance their collective and individual missions by joining forces on the specific and short-term goal of expanding birth leave in the Netherlands. Going from two days of paternity leave to six weeks of birth leave was a major step towards greater gender equality and will help to promote children’s and parents’ well-being.<sup>9,10,11,12</sup>

The Bernard van Leer Foundation commissioned RAND Europe to prepare a case study to investigate this legislative breakthrough and to document the efforts of the alliance to promote and inform the conversation on introducing the new law. An independent research team from RAND Europe undertook careful collection and analysis of empirical primary and secondary data sources. This included an extensive review of documentary sources and interviews with stakeholders representing a variety of perspectives and voices. The case study identified key characteristics that members of the alliance and external observers felt facilitated and enhanced the effectiveness of its work.

This summary captures valuable lessons for others aiming to inform policy change, or more specifically, improvements around engaged fatherhood and parental leave arrangements. The complete case study is available upon request by emailing [info@bvleerf.nl](mailto:info@bvleerf.nl).

## Key characteristics of the alliance that helped to maximise the impact of its work to achieve large-scale change

### The alliance identified a need for collective action to introduce birth leave legislation and saw an opportunity to join forces and tackle the issue from multiple perspectives

For many years, different organisations and some political parties had been asking for an expansion of paternity leave entitlement in the Netherlands.<sup>13</sup> However, **there was no collective action, strong civic engagement or coordinated voices calling for the change**. The alliance became aware of this and identified promoting dialogue to introduce birth leave (an extension of paternity leave) as an important contribution it could make.

The three organisations found a common goal in supporting the extension of birth leave, which was seen as a means to promote engaged parenthood in society. This aligned with their individual missions and was a short-term, easy to understand goal that would help draw attention to the importance of investing in early years, gender (in)equality and parent engagement. Research shows that engaged parenthood can lead to improved children's development outcomes, improved men's well-being and greater equality in the household, and improved women's well-being and employment prospects.<sup>14,15,16,17,18,19</sup> As such, by collaborating with each other, the alliance organisations could align different voices from the child's perspective (Bernard van Leer Foundation), from the men's perspective (Rutgers) and from the women's perspective (WOMEN Inc.) to tackle a single issue.

### The alliance strategically timed its efforts to take advantage of wider social and political factors

The alliance concentrated its efforts in the years leading up to the formation of the new 2017 Dutch government as this was identified

as a prime moment for change. The alliance was one of the many actors in the policy space, and was operating at a time when the **economic situation in the Netherlands improved**<sup>20,21,22</sup> and when **changes in EU law around partner leave were ongoing**.<sup>23</sup> These were identified as enabling factors that paved the way for the legislative change.<sup>24</sup>

While causal inferences about the influence of the alliance cannot be made, there is evidence suggesting that **the alliance played a contributory role in achieving the legislative change**. Interviewed stakeholders noted that there was a shift in societal, employer and political perceptions and attitudes towards engaged parenthood that became increasingly aligned with the alliance's goals in the years leading up to the legislative change.<sup>25</sup> For example, support for paid leave was increasing among employees and employers.<sup>26</sup> The alliance's work brought attention to this attitudinal shift and helped channel existing sentiment into efforts to support the legislative change. It also actively sought to inform the debate on birth leave by highlighting its benefits and showing that these outweighed the costs of an extension. As such, it can be argued that the alliance acted as a catalyst for this change during a key window of opportunity.<sup>27</sup>

### The case study identified five elements that were key to the wide-reaching success of the alliance

1. **A small, experienced and motivated team.** The alliance was driven by three organisations that had **experience undertaking large-scale work, extensive networks and complementary thematic expertise**.<sup>28,29,30</sup> The number of organisations involved in the alliance was kept intentionally small, to only three. The

small number of members allowed for better coordination and quick adaptation, and did not act as a barrier thanks to the expertise that each organisation already had.<sup>31,32</sup> The ability of the alliance to incorporate a myriad of perspectives under an overarching goal allowed for a broadening of the scope of the debate and for the inclusion of the wider priorities of each of the partners.<sup>33</sup> At an individual level, the alliance was staffed by **motivated individuals who based their collaboration on trust and who had a genuine interest in and knowledge of the issue.**<sup>34,35,36</sup>

2. **A clearly defined short-term and ambitious goal.** At the outset of its formation **the alliance defined an overarching goal, while allowing flexibility in its work** to adapt and react to the environment and events<sup>37,38,39,40,41,42</sup> Organising activities around policy dialogue, research, increasing public support and media coverage proved to be beneficial. The alliance strategically chose to pursue an ambitious goal of extending leave legislation by three months. This was based on the expectation that a first extension would be lower, and that asking for a longer extension would signal to policymakers that there was demand from the public. In this way, the strategy could provide an opening for a further extension of the entitlement in the future.
3. **Stakeholder identification and wide-ranging engagement and collaboration. Identifying different stakeholders in the field – supporters and opposition – was key.**<sup>43</sup> This guided the alliance's work and, for example, the decision to engage with employer and employee organisations.<sup>44</sup> Collaborating with a wide range of organisations, academic experts and other stakeholders helped increase the impact of the alliance's work.

4. **Identification of barriers: changing the focus of the debate from costs to benefits.** The financial costs of extending birth leave was one of the main arguments against the WIEG, and employer organisations were identified as the main opposing group. Therefore, the aim of **changing the focus of the debate from costs to benefits**<sup>45,46</sup> and developing a costing tool<sup>47</sup> that provided evidence on the actual costs of an extension (which had previously been estimated much higher than subsequently predicted),<sup>48</sup> was identified by many as an important approach adopted by the alliance.<sup>49,50</sup>
5. **Availability and flexibility of funding.** The alliance partners worked under an innovative arrangement in which the funder and grantees closely collaborated. Alliance partners identified strengths, limitations and learnings from working in this way (full details on these learnings are presented in the main case study report). In summary, the **active involvement of the funder in planning and monitoring** was identified as a strength. This gave the alliance greater flexibility and adaptability to respond to developments.<sup>51,52,53</sup> For the Bernard van Leer Foundation, closely supporting alliance activities **provided a new perspective and a greater opportunity to learn about successes and barriers**, which would probably not have been captured through the usual reporting and monitoring arrangements for grants.<sup>54</sup> The **availability of financial support** was crucial for undertaking alliance activities.<sup>55</sup>

## The alliance undertook key activities that focused on promoting engaged parenthood

The alliance undertook activities to increase dialogue on and support for the legislative change with the ultimate goal of improving the well-being of children, women and men. Its activities also sought to remove barriers to introducing birth leave ahead of the Dutch 2017 national elections from the perspective of employers, politicians and the general public. Its activities, among others, included:



### Providing evidence to political decision makers.

The alliance aimed to open dialogue with political parties and provide scientific evidence to them on the benefits of fathers' involvement in children's upbringing. In this way, political parties could make informed decisions to include family friendly policies and, more specifically, proposals to extend paid paternity leave in their election programmes or manifestos. Related to this, the alliance aimed to **encourage political debates** in parliament on the topic of work and parenting.



### Informing the dialogue between employer and employee organisations.

The alliance worked to align efforts with employee trade unions and gain support from progressive companies for increased paternity leave. They invited employer organisations to events that aimed to increase understanding of the many benefits of family friendly policies in the workplace.



### Building public support and bringing men's and fathers' voices into the debate.

The alliance sought to strengthen public support by ensuring that all fathers' perspectives on paternity leave – including those of LGBT<sup>56</sup>

and adoptive parents – could be heard. The establishment of the 'Fatherhood Platform'<sup>57</sup> was central to this. This platform gathers leading scientists, opinion makers and individual civil society organisations working on topics such as fatherhood, caring fathers, working mothers and paternity leave. It is open to public role models, leading employers (e.g. companies providing exemplar leave for their male employees), young professional organisations and journalists.



### Focusing efforts on strategically using research.

Alliance research activities were guided by three objectives: conducting research to measure public opinion towards the extension of paternity leave, providing evidence on the actual costs of a future extension, and showing the benefits to employers and society of having family friendly policies in place.



### Promoting coverage of the issue in the media.

The alliance focused on ensuring that stories related to leave arrangements and engaged parenthood were picked up by the Dutch media. Not only did it aim to include expert opinions in the debate, but it also sought to ensure that the voice of fathers would become salient. Alliance media coverage efforts cut across all activity areas.



### The alliance continues to focus on tackling barriers to birth leave uptake

The work of the alliance did not finish following the introduction of the WIEG, and it continues to operate to ensure the uptake of birth leave by lower income parents and those working in small companies. A limitation of the WIEG, as formulated in 2018, is that it could disadvantage smaller companies or those self-employed<sup>58</sup> as the costs of parental leave (e.g. arranging cover for employees while they are away) is likely to be a higher burden.<sup>59</sup> Interviewees also noted that as the five week extension will only be paid at 70 per cent of employees' salaries, those with lower paid incomes may be less likely to take up the leave

as they may not be able to afford to lose 30 per cent of their income.<sup>60</sup> Traditional family norms and a culture where mothers are seen as the primary caregivers for children may remain a challenge to increasing birth leave uptake by some fathers and partners.<sup>61,62,63</sup>

Therefore, the alliance has identified that it is important to work on reducing these uptake barriers to ensure that all parents – regardless of income level – are able to avail themselves of this new benefit. Part of the alliance's approach has focused on continuing to highlight the benefits linked to engaged fatherhood to address remaining unfavourable societal views and workplace perceptions that hinder uptake.<sup>64</sup>

This document summarises key findings captured in a case study developed by RAND Europe for the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The **full case study report** is available upon request from the Bernard van Leer Foundation. Interested parties can email [info@byleerf.nl](mailto:info@byleerf.nl) to request access.

## Notes

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- 2 OECD (2016) 'Parental Leave: Where are the Fathers?' *OECD Policy Brief*. As of 6 March 2020: <https://www.oecd.org/policy-briefs/parental-leave-where-are-the-fathers.pdf>
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- 4 (Int2\_Academic, Int3\_Academic, Int8\_PolRep, Int1\_PolRep).
- 5 (Int10\_FathersOrg).
- 6 The full title is 'Wet Invoering Extra Geboorteverlof'.
- 7 The entitlement to five additional weeks is officially referred to as 'additional birth leave'. In this case study, 'birth leave' is used to refer to both entitlements (five days of fully paid leave and five weeks of non-transferrable leave).
- 8 It is important to note that the 'strategic parenthood alliance' did not position themselves externally with this label. This term is coined solely for the purposes of the case study RAND Europe developed for the Bernard van Leer Foundation.
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- 23 (Int2\_Academic, Int1\_PolRep, Int3\_Academic, Int5\_Tradeunion, Int4\_EmployOrgRep, Int7\_Policymakers, Int14\_Partner).
- 24 (Int6\_Media, Int1\_PolRep, Int7\_Policymakers, Int12\_CommsConsultant, Int2\_Academic, Int8\_PolRep, Int14\_Partner).
- 25 (Int1\_PolRep, Int11\_Employer).
- 26 (Int5\_Tradeunion).
- 27 (Int15\_Partner).
- 28 Partner grantee 1. Contributions after validation workshop.
- 29 Partner grantee 2. Contributions after validation workshop.
- 30 Partner funder. Contributions after validation workshop.
- 31 (Int13\_Partner).
- 32 The Hague, 17 January 2019, Case study inception meeting with the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Rutgers and WOMEN Inc.
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- 43 (Int15\_Partner).
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- 46 (Int13\_Partner, Int15\_Partner, Int12\_CommsConsultant, Int5\_Tradeunion, Int4\_EmployOrgRep).
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- 49 (Int3\_Academic, Int2\_Academic, Int6\_Media, Int8\_PolRep, Int12\_CommsConsultant, Int11\_Employer, Int15\_Partner, Int14\_Partner, Int13\_Partner).
- 50 WOMEN Inc, Bernard van Leer Foundation and Rutgers (2016, 7 April). Project Ouders en Werk 2016 – 2018.
- 51 Partner grantee 1. Contributions after validation workshop.
- 52 Partner grantee 2. Contributions after validation workshop.
- 53 Partner funder. Contributions after validation workshop.
- 54 Partner funder. Contributions after validation workshop.
- 55 (Int14\_Partner).
- 56 Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender.
- 57 <https://vaderzoektverlof.nl/>
- 58 (Int11\_Employer).
- 59 (Int6\_Media, Int5\_Tradeunion, Int15\_Partner, Int1\_PolRep, Int10\_FathersOrg).
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- 64 The Hague, 25 September 2019, Validation workshop with the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Rutgers and WOMEN Inc.

## **The 2019-2020 case studies and the Bernard van Leer Foundation's focus on early childhood education**

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is an independent foundation working globally to inform and inspire large-scale action to support the health and well-being of babies, toddlers and the people who care for them. In 2019, they commissioned RAND Europe to deliver a set of case studies to document learning about implementing early childhood development programmes at scale. The objective of these case studies is to ensure that lessons on 'what works' in operating at scale were systematically captured, assessed and made available for other governments, practitioners and foundations to use. In particular, the Foundation was interested in learning about the critical conditions for achieving sustainable impact at scale in early childhood development.