

Living the communal life — in your 30s, 40s and beyond

Written by Lauren Comiteau
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Marlon Linnemann (middle) rents in a shared-living space so he can be near his son. More people in their 30s and older are living communally. (Julius Schrank/www.juliussschrank.de)

When Marlon Linnemann split from his longtime girlfriend about a year ago, he immediately started looking for a place of his own.

In Amsterdam, where housing is in short supply and prices run high, it was no easy task, all the more so because Linnemann, a 37-year-old personal trainer, wanted to continue living in the family-oriented neighborhood of Ijburg to be close to his 5-year-old son.

After two months of searching, Linnemann was running out of options.

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— Jan Latten

“Then this came up,” he said. Linnemann found Parentsouse, a shared-living space that opened last August for separated parents who, for 600 euro (about \$830) per month, can cohabit with similarly situated individuals for as long as one year while they search for a more permanent solution.

“I look forward to a place of my own,” said Linnemann. “But for a first place, it’s ideal. It gives some security for one year... and offers my son a little peace during a very hard time.”

He has his own floor with a bedroom and bathroom, but the common rooms are shared: kitchen, living room, garden and even a roof terrace. His son spends designated nights in the communal house, sharing Linnemann’s room, but isn’t allowed to live there full time.

Linnemann is one of a growing demographic entering shared-living accommodations. As divorce rates continue to rise, especially for people in their 30s and 40s, these kinds of alternative-living arrangements will only increase, said Jan Latten, a University of Amsterdam professor and demographer at Statistics Netherlands.

The rise of these new singletons, which extends to 20-somethings and pensioners alike, has led to a whole host of shared-living arrangements. Many people are driven by economics, desire for companionship and, sometimes, simply by lifestyle choice.

“If more and more people are loners in society, which they are, people look for alternatives to not being alone,” Latten explained.

Not just for students

Soaring rental prices, housing shortages and divorce are sending an increasing number of older professionals to flatsharing websites. At Easyroommate.com, the fastest growing category of house sharers is now men between the ages of 45 and 54. The number seeking roommates in the 40-plus age range has increased by 2% in the past two years, what the company calls a “significant figure.”

“Flatsharing is no longer just for students,” said Jonathan Moore, Easyroommate.com’s general manager. “It is now a great and cost effective alternative for those who have been priced out of the property market.”

“What we’ve noticed is a number of people, struggling to find work, continuing to live in the family home on weekends and travelling to the city to find work during the week,” said Easyroommate.com’s Maya Harruna of the lingering effects of the economic crisis. “Flatsharing is the most economic option, and it offers companionship and the chance to live with an interesting variety of people.”

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The younger generation, too, is increasingly statistically single, with many young people returning home after relationships break up or their schooling is finished. The number of these so-called “boomerang children” in the Netherlands has doubled in two decades for instance, Statistics Netherlands found, and recent figures from Britain’s Office for National Statistics show that one-quarter of adults between the ages of 20 and 34 in the UK are now living with their parents.

In the US, that figure is even higher: 36% of people between the ages of 18 and 31 are currently in their familial homes — 4 percentage points higher than before the 2007 economic crisis — according to the Pew Research Center (which based its numbers on US Census Bureau data).

“People used to get married and leave home. It was forever,” said Latten. “But in the last years, this standard transition is gone.”

On the other end of the life spectrum, retirees are also surfing flatsharing websites looking to supplement their pensions, cover rising utility costs and find companionship. Since 2011, there has been an increase of nearly 60% in the number of over 60s looking to share flats or rent out rooms on Easyroommate.com, the site says.

Sense of connection

Gichena Chacha moved to the Dutch city of Utrecht from Kenya eight years ago to study. Now 37 years old, she has had various shared-living arrangements over the years, sometimes for financial reasons and sometimes for companionship.

“I like the communal lifestyle. I feel like it’s a continuation of something,” added Chacha, explaining that in her native Kenya communal living is the norm. “I talk to myself when I’m cooking, and then I think, ‘Oh wait, I live alone.’”

A couple of years ago she got a room in the home of a 75-year-old Dutch man in exchange for cleaning his house. Three months into the arrangement, Chacha realized the homeowner

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primarily wanted a bit of companionship.

“He wanted two days a week to drink coffee and talk about life,” said Chacha. “I found it strange. Dutch people like privacy. But he had problems with his family and was lonely. He told me World War II stories and I also got interested in European classical music that I didn’t know anything about.”

For Peter Bakker, board member of the Dutch Federatie Gemeenschappelijk Wonen, or Community Housing Federation, an organisation representing hundreds of the Netherlands 10,000 intentional communities, living communally has been purely a lifestyle choice rather than a financial or social necessity.

The 67-year old has been living in a co-housing community in the southern Dutch city of Eindhoven since 1983. It consists of 10 specially built clusters of six homes each, with a shared entrance leading to private living spaces. But there is also a common living room, kitchen, laundry room and garden in a community that describes itself as combining the “enjoyment of your own living space with the social aspects of life in a group.”

“I want to have more contact with my neighbors,” said Bakker. “I think a nuclear family is too few people to have contact with. It’s like tribes and villages of the past, except you choose your own people.”

Would you consider such communal living arrangement? What do you think? To comment on this or anything you have seen on BBC Capital, head over to our [Facebook](#) page or message us on [Twitter](#).