

Social connectedness among older people in Moldova



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HelpAge International's 2020-2030 strategy recognises the importance of social connectedness to older people's dignity, voice and wellbeing. However, much of the work in this area is in high-income countries and focuses on isolation and loneliness.

Social connectedness is about feeling you belong in your community. To better understand this, HelpAge and the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness carried out an exploratory survey in July 2020 with 51 women and men over the age of 50 in Moldova. This summary illustrates the key findings of the survey.

The research examined how the intersections between different identities, such as ethnicity, citizenship, language, gender, disability, residential area and work status, informed older people's ability to feel a sense of belonging.

Older people in the survey indicated that the length of time someone had lived in their community, their established relationships with community members and their previous role, for example as a teacher or councillor, had an on-going impact on their sense of belonging and how socially connected they felt. Women, a higher percentage of whom lived alone, placed more importance on engagement with friends and neighbours and on religious and cultural events than men. Older persons with disabilities placed less value on social spaces, which could have been because they could not access them. Minority ethnic

status and language had less of a negative impact on a sense of belonging than anticipated. However, where you lived made a difference: participants living in rural communities felt older people were valued more highly in the community than in urban communities.

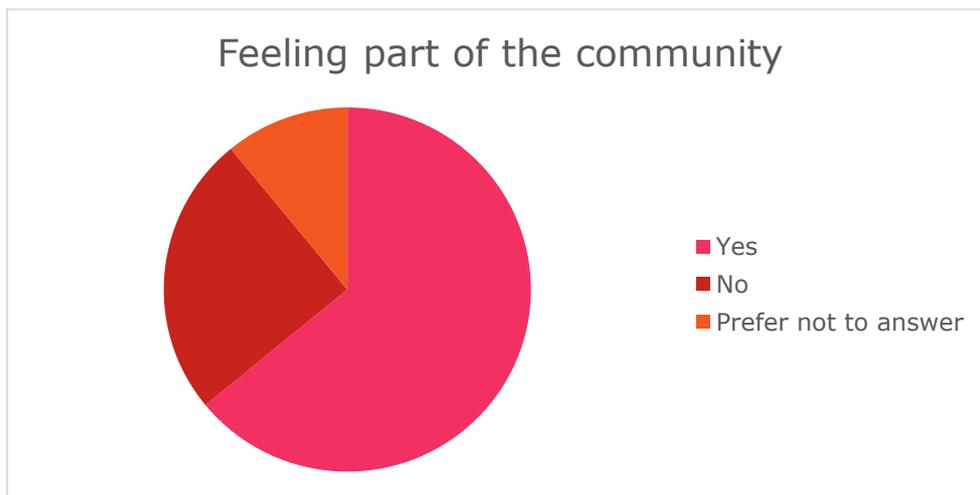
Participants' suggestions on how to improve their social connectedness and sense of belonging included more and better access to public, social and cultural spaces; more opportunities to get involved in the development of their communities; and improvement of government services.

The findings presented here aim to capture the views of the 51 older women and men interviewed in the survey. They are not intended to be representative of the population of older people as a whole. More information on the survey and how it was conducted can be found at the end of this summary.

Findings

Feeling part of the community

The vast majority of participants said they felt part of their community.



Most placed more value on leisure activities and hobbies than household activities in feeling a sense of belonging, particularly those who were retired. Participants had mixed feelings on the value they placed on established cultural and ethnic events, like village days or religious ceremonies, with some attributing high importance to attending these events while others responded with indifference.

Most participants valued their family relationships as important for belonging and assessed those relationships as strong, although those who had lost their partners or children put more importance on non-family member relationships.

Most placed importance on government services in establishing social connectedness. However, in all 12 survey locations participants said services were lacking. They wanted more public spaces, parks or cultural centres so they could socialise with other older people and accessible transport so they could take part in activities and access public spaces.

Ethnic and national identity

Sixty-nine per cent of participants identified as Moldovan, 20 per cent as Romanian, 10 per cent as Ukrainian and two per cent as Roma. Despite the literature review showing people from ethnic minority backgrounds experiencing greater social isolation due to stigma and discrimination, the responses reflected no distinction in how Moldovan, Romanian, Ukrainian or Roma people understood and valued social connectedness or in their sense of belonging.

All participants identified as citizens of Moldova. Some said their Moldovan citizenship fostered a sense of community and national belonging through their ability to vote and participate in political processes.

"I still feel like a member of the community, I have the right to vote and after 16 years as a local councillor, people appreciate what I did for the community and thus for myself."

Retired, widowed Moldovan man in his seventies living alone in a rural area

Others refuted this claim and said older communities were only reached out to during election seasons to secure their vote.

"I feel that at this age the local public administration has forgotten about us. Only at elections do they remember older people."

Retired, widowed, Romanian woman in her eighties living alone in an urban community

Language

Eighty-eight per cent of participants spoke Romanian, the official language of Moldova and 10 per cent spoke Russian. Although more than half of the Russian speakers felt older people were quite undervalued in their community, more than half also felt part of their community. Responses indicated this was due to involvement in community activities and family and community networks.

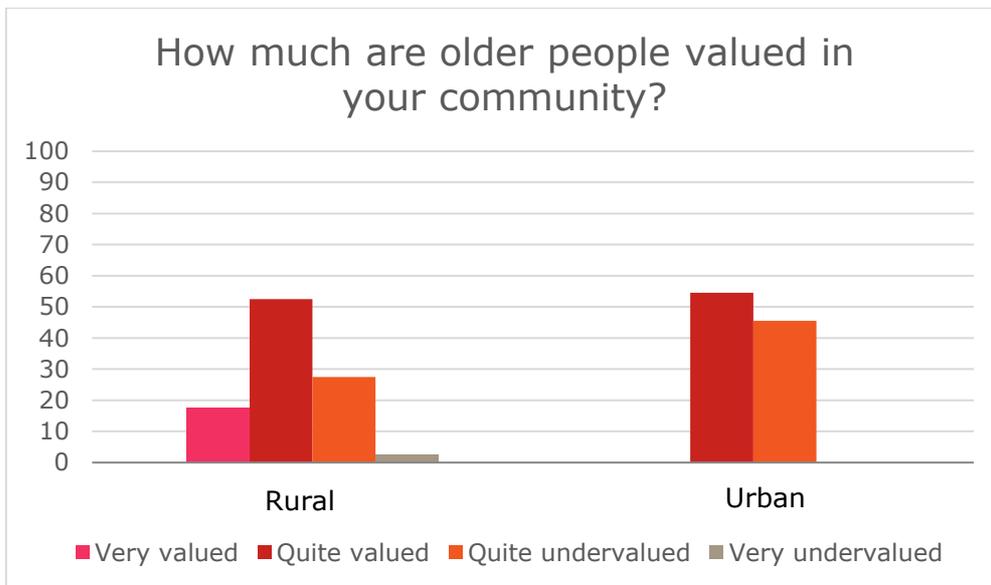
"I am a native of this village. My children live here. I feel myself part of this community because its members need my help."

Russian speaking, retired, married woman in her sixties living with her husband in a rural community

Where you live

In this survey, where you lived had an impact on your sense of belonging. Seventy-eight per cent lived in a rural community and 22 per cent in an urban one. Those who lived in rural communities said participating in religious, ethnic and cultural community groups and events was more important to their sense of belonging than those in urban communities.

While both rural and urban residents placed an equally high importance on interpersonal relationships, those living in rural areas left their homes more often to interact with non-family members. Those living in the city were more likely to feel older people were quite undervalued in the community and felt safety was critical to feeling socially connected. Conversely those living in rural communities were more likely to feel quite or very valued in their villages and felt safety was less important to feeling a sense of belonging.



The greater sense of belonging was further corroborated by people living in rural areas who disclosed in greater depth how their knowledge of, and relationships with, everyone in their community allowed them to develop social relationships and connections.

“The community I live in is my soul. Here I created my family. Here are all my friends and relatives. I have always been attached to this village.”

Widowed, Romanian woman in her sixties in paid work living alone in a rural community

Disability

The survey revealed the barriers some older people face in accessing and engaging in activities that foster greater belonging. Those who experienced difficulty walking or climbing the stairs, seeing, hearing or remembering or concentrating gave less importance to leisure, religious and cultural events and activities than those who did not report the same difficulties.

“I have great difficulty moving. I spend most of my time at home. Because I don't have a wheelchair, I can't go to the park, the store or public places.”

Retired, Moldovan woman in her sixties, widowed and living alone in an urban community

They also said they felt older people were less valued in the community. Those with the greatest difficulty walking or climbing stairs said their caregiver was very important to remain socially connected.

Other participants reported poor health as a barrier to feeling part of the community.

"I do not feel part of the community, because I do not have the strength and health to get involved in its activities. I am more isolated at home and do not interact much with members of my community."

Retired, Moldovan man in his sixties living in a rural community with his wife, children and grandchildren

Gender

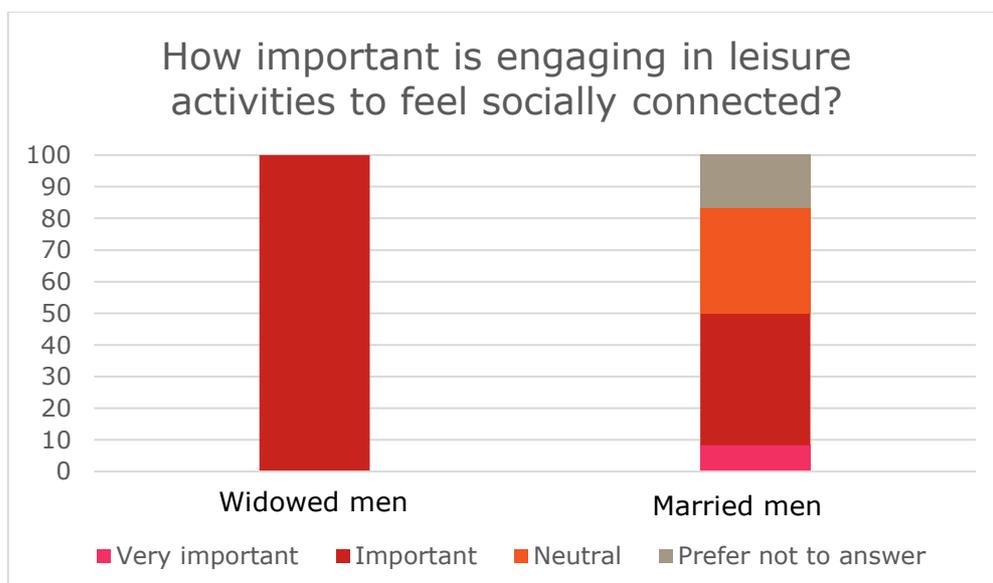
The literature review revealed that some studies have shown that men are more at risk of social isolation while others have shown that women are. In this research individual traits such as retired employment status, Moldovan citizenship, heterosexual identity, mostly rural residency, and diverse age ranges were similar in both gender groups. However, there was a significant difference in marital status and living arrangements. Sixty-seven per cent of the men interviewed were married and living with their spouse, whereas 67 per cent of the women interviewed were living alone.

Women and men felt equally part of the community. They placed similar levels of importance on public transport for social connection, with women placing slightly more value on government services. Women valued engaging in religious groups and events and in ethnic and cultural community groups more highly than men.

"Even though I am over 70 years old, I am still invited to various activities in the village such as the [day of the] saint of the village, March 8. That still makes me feel part of the community."

Retired, widowed, Romanian speaking woman in her seventies living alone a rural community

However, men who were widowed valued community events and leisure activities to feel socially connected more than men who were married.



Male respondents, particularly married men who lived with their spouses, valued daily work and household chores, such as working on the farm or cooking, more highly than community activities to feel a sense of belonging. Women equally valued daily work and household chores but women who lived with their spouses placed greater importance on leisure activities, such as handicraft clubs or gardening, community, cultural and religious events to feel socially connected

than women who lived alone. Women who lived alone said finances played a more important role in their ability to participate in these activities.

Overall women valued communication with friends and neighbours more than men and said they left their home more frequently to interact with them.

Length of time in the community

The amount of time people had lived in their community was an important factor in their feeling of social connectedness and belonging. Those who had lived in or served their community for many years, for example as a teacher or councillor, said their positive standing fostered a sense of belonging even after they had stopped engaging in formal activities. In rural communities in particular, village members visited older people who were widowed, isolated or living on their own.

“I am a part of this community, because, as a teacher at the village school, I have taught many generations of children. Nowadays, many of my students visit me daily, even though I have not had my own children.”

Retired, widowed, Moldovan woman in her eighties living alone in a rural community

What older people say will improve their social connectedness and sense of belonging

When asked what they would like to have improved or see to ensure they feel part of the community, participants mentioned improvement to home care services, more attention to older persons with disabilities, better access to water and amenities, an increase in pensions, and more interaction with other people, including younger people. A number suggested:

- Creation of public spaces where older people can socialize, such as parks, laundries, canteens and markets
- Establishment of cultural centres and/or more cultural activities for older people to participate in
- Accessible public transport so older people can participate in activities and access public spaces
- More opportunities for getting involved in the development of their communities such as volunteering
- More activities and government services for older people.

Survey on older people's social connectedness and belonging in Moldova

The aim of the survey was to understand how older people of diverse identities value particular activities, people and amenities in their lives to feel a sense of social connectedness and belonging.

The survey questions were informed by a literature review of existing research and adapted to the Moldovan context. The questionnaire covered individual characteristics such as age, gender, disability, ethnicity, primary language spoken, citizenship, work status, marital status and living arrangements. Questions focused on how respondents value certain elements in their life in feeling a sense of belonging, whether and how they felt part of their community, and what could be done to improve this.

How the survey was conducted

The survey was carried out in July 2020 with 33 women and 18 men over the age of 50 from 12 rural and urban communities in Moldova. Due to COVID-19 public health restrictions, the survey was done by phone using non-probability sampling based on convenience and who was accessible to HelpAge Moldova staff. The findings in this summary are intended to capture the views of the older people interviewed in the survey. As the sample was limited to 51 people, the findings are not intended to be representative of the population of older people as a whole.

A full research report is available at <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/PDF-Understanding-Social-Connectedness-Amongst-Older-People.pdf>

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HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.

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