



SAMUEL CENTRE  
FOR SOCIAL  
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# **Understanding Social Connectedness amongst Older People in Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries**

Belonging in Moldova:  
An Exploratory Case Study

By Mayumi Sato  
Social Connectedness Fellow 2020  
Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness  
In Partnership with HelpAge International

[www.socialconnectedness.org](http://www.socialconnectedness.org)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, Understanding Social Connectedness amongst Older People in Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries (LMCs), explores how older people in Moldova experience, understand, and pursue social connectedness and belonging. This exploratory research is a joint study undertaken in collaboration between HelpAge International, an international NGO that helps older people claim their rights, and the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC), a non-profit dedicated to overcoming social isolation and building social connectedness. Using Moldova as a pilot country to serve as a case study of a global analysis of how older people come to understand and value social connectedness, this participatory action research integrates older peoples' voices in Moldova to better uphold older peoples' rights. In collecting, coding, and analyzing 51 survey respondents from 12 villages and cities across Moldova, this research examines how the intersections between individual identity, interpersonal relationships, and the built environment affect belonging amongst older people.

Ultimately, the results demonstrate that older communities define social connectedness across a wide spectrum of definitions, most saliently depending on individual family circumstances, gender, existing local government services, length of time spent in the community, and access to community spaces. Most notably, social connectedness is a phenomenon and feeling expressed as one that allowed older people to feel physically active and access community-wide services, supported by individuals such as their family and neighbours, or paid attention to by government and local administration with regards to their needs. Research findings have provided clarity in future research and programmatic work by identifying the determinants that lead to the fulfillment of social connectedness and belonging, and the potential outcomes from their absence. Organizationally, this research is critical as it stands as a part of HelpAge's 2020-2030 strategy to develop a program of work that builds connections to improve a sense of belonging. Findings from the survey will inform HelpAge country programs' work with older people. Thus, the report findings contribute to a planned global multi-country study that informs future programmatic work of HelpAge to improve older peoples' sense of belonging, and raise public awareness around issues of social connectedness.

### **Terminology:**

In this report, the term '**social connectedness**' is used to describe the ability for everyone to exercise their basic human rights. This involves people, regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or political affiliation, having the ability and opportunity to belong.<sup>1</sup> The term '**belonging**' is used to describe a state of wholeness that fosters a community, rooted in place with a feeling of purpose and a sense of shared mission in society. While these terms are used for the purposes of this report, understandings of social connectedness are understudied, and thus community awareness around their definitions are limited. In coordination with HelpAge International HQ and Moldova, this research re-defined these terms to adapt to the Moldovan context. For clarity and ease of translation, social connectedness was described as 'the feeling that you belong in your community' to research respondents.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness. n.d. About Us. *Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness*, <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/about-us/>, (accessed 09 August 2020).

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## INTRODUCTION

With increasing trends of life expectancy and fertility on a global level, countries around the world are experiencing rapid demographic transitions.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, people are living longer with greater improvements in individual and community-level health, with the proportion of older people in country demographics increasing. In response, this has necessitated some countries to act swiftly to promote safer and sound environments that tend to the needs of older people, and develop age-sensitive services, policies, and institutional safeguarding mechanisms that ensure older peoples' well-being. In particular, this has raised concerns and important discussions amongst some low-income and middle-income countries (LMCs), who are facing additional pressures to implement new strategies to respond to demographic transitions.<sup>3</sup>

As demographic structures and awareness around ageing societies have differed by country, national governments have responded differently to the development of age-sensitive policies and programs.<sup>4</sup> Countries have adopted some, but are still lacking approaches in prioritizing services that yield different levels of life satisfaction, mental health, health care resources, and social security benefits to older communities. Formal standalone policies addressing social connectedness and belonging are often absent or limited, with older people having to rely on informal networks of friends, relatives and

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<sup>2</sup> Chen, Cynthia, Goldman, Dana, Zissimopoulos, Julie, Rowe, John, and Research Network on Ageing Society. 2018. "Multidimensional comparison of countries' adaptation to societal ageing." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 (37): 9169-9174.

<sup>3</sup> Mapoma, Christopher Chabila. and Masaiti, Gift. 2012. "Social Isolation and Ageing in Zambia: Examining the Possible Predictors." *Journal of Ageing Research* 1-6.

<sup>4</sup> Chen, Goldman, Zissimopoulos, Rowe, and Research Network on Ageing Society. "Multidimensional comparison of countries' adaptation to societal ageing."

civil society programs to maintain better mental and physical well-being to undergo “successful ageing.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite this critical attention to understanding how ageing societies require special attention to older people’s rights and needs, opportunities to integrate their narratives and perspectives are scarce in scholarship and in organizational work. To help older people claim their rights through research, this study focuses on older people in Moldova as a case study of a larger, global examination of how older communities in LMCs find resilience and belonging in society. Specifically, this research project explored: How do older people in Moldova of diverse identities value and understand social connectedness and belonging?

This paper is structured into the following sections. First, a literature review is provided of the key findings on how older people experience social connectedness, belonging, or isolation at the global scale. Secondly, research methodologies are discussed with mention to ethics and limitations. Thirdly, contextualizing responses within the Moldovan context, an analysis and discussions of findings is provided, examining how the interplay between individual identity, environment, and existing services inform older peoples’ ability to feel better or less connected than others. Lastly, concluding recommendations are offered on how older peoples’ ability to socially connect and belong can be better understood by taking an intersectional approach to how individual capacities, resources, interpersonal relationships, and built environment serve as mutually-informing determinants.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## BELONGING AMONGST OLDER PEOPLE

With changing demographic transitions across the globe, there has been increasing scholarly attention to how older people are enduring these population transitions and staying resilient through processes of ageing. The following literature review thus examines past research on social connectedness in older populations, the micro- and macro-level factors underpinning and informing social isolation, studies focusing on low-income and middle-income countries, transnational comparisons, and gender and social concerns in social connectedness.

Most scholarship around understanding social isolation and the absence of belonging has focused on micro-level factors, such as living arrangements, marital status, and religious beliefs of the individual in affecting one's susceptibility to feeling isolated.<sup>6</sup> Comparatively, it has paid scant attention to the larger, macro-scale factors, such as the built environment, gender norms, national policies, and societal attitudes towards ageing in shaping social isolation.<sup>7</sup> While there is robust scholarship that has traced the importance of social connectedness in enabling positive health and social outcomes for older people, defining social connectedness has often presented challenges and contested notions between individuals.<sup>8</sup> A central issue in understanding how social connectedness relates to older adults is that its definition has been defined inconsistently, and thus the determinants and outcomes of social

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<sup>6</sup> Kobayashi, Cloutier-Fisher, Denise, and Roth. 2009. "Making Meaningful Connections: A Profile of Social Isolation and Health Among Older Adults in Small Town and Small City, British Columbia." *Journal of Ageing and Health* 21(2): 374–397.

<sup>7</sup> Gorman, Jones, and Turner. "Older People, Mobility and Transport in Low- and Middle-Income Countries."

<sup>8</sup> Morgan, Tessa, Wiles, Janine, Park, Hong-Jae, Moeke-Maxwell, Tess, Dewes, Ofa, Black, Stella, Williams, Lisa, and Gott, Merryn. 2019. "Social connectedness: what matters to older people?" *Ageing and Society* 1-19.

connectedness have been irregularly construed.<sup>9</sup> In particular, there lies an inherent societal assumption that social connectedness wanes with age, and oftentimes this definition is internalized by older communities themselves, leading them to heightened levels of social isolation and loneliness. Many conceptions of social connectedness have defined it as the opposite of loneliness, while others have acknowledged its subjective understanding in how one finds meaning and relationships with others personally, interpersonally, and societally.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, regardless of these varied conceptions of social connectedness, most of the literature has rather focused on older people and their susceptibility to isolation. Increasingly discussions around social connectedness are entering mainstream public discussions in its positive impacts on cognitive performance, mental health, and life span.<sup>11,12</sup> In particular, there has been interest into the individual factors that affect older people's ability to feel socially connected. However, interventions for promoting social connectedness focus on individual-level and micro-level solutions, rather than understanding the macro-level structural underpinnings behind social isolation.

Despite identified factors that enable or prohibit social connectedness in scholarship, such as government resources, public transportation, welfare, and health care for older people, there are many concerns with the trajectory of where many of these institutional programs are heading. For instance, in some countries, many social welfare programs are under the process of gradual defunding, which will lead to many

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<sup>9</sup> O'Rourke, Hannah. and Sidani, Souraya. 2017. "Definition, Determinants, and Outcomes of Social Connectedness for Older Adults: A Scoping Review." *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* 43(7): 43-52.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Kobayashi, Cloutier-Fisher, and Roth. "Making Meaningful Connections."

<sup>12</sup> Chen, Goldman, Zissimopoulos, Rowe, and Research Network on Ageing Society. "Multidimensional comparison of countries' adaptation to societal ageing."

long-term implications. Many older people have consequently lost their safety net, having formerly relied on these programs, and now require alternatives to long-term care services and financial contingency plans in the case of chronic disability and health outcomes.<sup>13</sup> This underlines the importance of not only ensuring the existence of such service and resource provisions, but also the long-term maintenance of them.

### ***Social Connectedness in Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries (LMCs)***

With LMCs dealing with shifting cultural, institutional, political, and economic norms and structures, thereby re-shaping society and individual relationships within it, emerging research is increasingly focusing on how the contextual interplay between socioeconomic, geographic, demographic, class, and health markers in older populations inform older peoples' level of belonging. One central issue around social isolation in LMCs is the lack of policies in addressing how ageing populations should inform shifts in household living arrangements and the social and mental impacts of these cultural and household shifts.<sup>14</sup> Given that LMCs run the risk of providing weaker service provisions due to limited resources, finances, and political will, it is also critical to understand the potential risks that these conditions will incur on older people, and the impacts on their sense of belonging.<sup>15,16</sup> This is particularly important given strong scholarly evidence that points to the pertinence of providing accessible services, such as adequate transport and peer support networks, to improve older peoples' ability to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Lamb, Sarah. 2009. *Ageing and the Indian Diaspora: Cosmopolitan Families in India and Abroad*. Bloomington: Indian University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gorman, Jones, and Turner. "Older People, Mobility and Transport in Low- and Middle-Income Countries."



maintain social contact.<sup>17</sup> In particular, the lack of a robust social welfare system presents high risk of social isolation, and a further burden on older peoples' health and wellbeing.<sup>18,19</sup> In LMCs wherein governments have not provided robust retirement plans and pensions, this demands older people to find other means of income-generation or to live frugally, prohibiting them from partaking in expense-based activities.

Since the macro-level structures mutually inform the micro-level access of services, resources, and decision-making power of older people, it is important to understand the interplay between these factors in contributing to or lessening social connectedness. For instance, in many LMCs, there are a myriad of shifts that are taking place as a consequence of a rising middle class. In India, as middle-income households increase, outmigration from local to city centres and abroad has led to a deviation from traditional practices of multigenerational homes.<sup>20</sup> Moving away from traditional familial living arrangements has yielded a mix of results. While on the one hand, some have purported that these shifts have cultivated an independent and individualist way of living that poses less burden on the daughter-in-law, who is typically obliged to take care of all family members in the household. On the other hand, others note how it has also posed detrimental effects on those whose identities primarily center around kinship, consequently yielding emotionally distressing feeling of alienation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Age UK. 2015. "Loneliness and Isolation Evidence Review." 1-30.

<sup>18</sup> Gorman, Jones, and Turner. "Older People, Mobility and Transport in Low- and Middle-Income Countries."

<sup>19</sup> Kotian, Devaki, Mathews, Maria, Parsekar, Shradha, Nair, Suma, Binu, V S, and Hangma Subba, Sonu. 2018. "Factors Associated with Social Isolation among the Older People in India." *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry and Neurology* 31(5): 271-278.

<sup>20</sup> Lamb, Sarah. *Ageing and the Indian Diaspora*.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

## **Gender and Cultural Norms in Social Connectedness**

Despite the general assertion that increasing age, single, low or little formally educated, rural residential, and financially dependent individuals are particularly at risk of feeling excluded from society,<sup>22,23,24</sup> gender remains to be a factor that has spurred significant discussion and contention in this research. While some studies reveal that men are more likely vulnerable to social isolation, other studies contest this claim, citing the high-risk nature of women in losing the ability to socially connect.<sup>25,26</sup> Given that the normative gender roles and conceptions of gender vary significantly by culture and context, it is not surprising to see the variability of gendered impacts on social isolation. In particular, social structures wherein patriarchal and gendered norms are enacted at the household-level to limit decision-making power of women often see a high level of social isolation amongst women.<sup>27,28</sup> With populations in many LMCs facing increasing life expectancies, it is critical to examine the gendered component of how communities define social connectedness and isolation, particularly given the disproportionate demographic makeup of older populations comprising of women.<sup>29</sup>

Further studies that have examined women's relationship to empowerment and ageing noted that access to resources does not necessarily translate to a higher quality of life and feeling of connectedness. Rather, the perceptions of these services, which is

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<sup>22</sup> Afshar, Haleh, Franks, Myfanwy, Maynard, Mary, and Wray, Sharon. 2002. "Gender ethnicity and empowerment in later life." *Quality in ageing - Policy, practice and research* 3(1): 27-33.

<sup>23</sup> Kotian, Mathews, Parsekar, Nair, Binu, and Hangma Subba. "Factors Associated with Social Isolation among the Older People in India."

<sup>24</sup> Lamb, Sarah. *Ageing and the Indian Diaspora*.

<sup>25</sup> Kobayashi, Cloutier-Fisher, and Roth. "Making Meaningful Connections."

<sup>26</sup> Mapoma and Masaiti. "Social Isolation and Ageing in Zambia."

<sup>27</sup> Kotian, Mathews, Parsekar, Nair, Binu, and Hangma Subba. "Factors Associated with Social Isolation among the Older People in India."

<sup>28</sup> Lamb, Sarah. *Ageing and the Indian Diaspora*.

<sup>29</sup> Mapoma and Masaiti. "Social Isolation and Ageing in Zambia."

highly contingent on cultural norms and values, informed how older women viewed their impact. For individual circumstances that impact a sense of belonging, past research has revealed how the understanding of what it means to have a high quality of life amongst older women impacted how they valued and realized their degree of social integration, including living arrangements, social/marital status, shared identity groups, and psychological support and health.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, examinations of filial obligations as caretakers of intergenerational households in sub-Saharan Africa and Myanmar denote how the provision of family care often rests with the normative cultural obligations of the older people's offspring in many African and Asian countries.<sup>31,32</sup> Given how the cultural norms of providing as caregivers to their family members is inherently a part of societal duties, greater attention to how this plays out into other LMCs is pertinent. These discrepancies in literature indicate how identities are not inherently predisposed to social isolation, rather the value that is associated with these identities create societal systems and social behaviours that lead to a feeling of isolation. Thus, when replicating similar studies, it is pertinent to situate how identities are constructed within the country and cultural context to understand underlying factors that lead to older people's isolation.

Yet despite the varied contexts that alter how social isolation and connectedness is valued and defined, transnational research has highlighted the importance of participation of older people in their environments. Despite this, negative social attitudes towards older people exist across countries, with many creating psychological effects

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<sup>30</sup> Afshar, Franks, Maynard, and Wray. "Gender ethnicity and empowerment in later life."

<sup>31</sup> Gorman, Jones, and Turner. "Older People, Mobility and Transport in Low- and Middle-Income Countries."

<sup>32</sup> Lamb, Sarah. *Ageing and the Indian Diaspora*.

which may indirectly propel many older people to not partake in social spaces.<sup>33</sup> Hence, by understanding the relationship between individual decision-making and meaning-making, and cultural and social attitudes towards older people and their role in society, it reinforces the notion that the micro and macro structures should not be examined in silos, rather seen as a mutually-informing process.

While these factors were assessed for their implication on older people to feel socially connected, there has been little space in the research process for older populations to define their own conditions on existing and absent individual and structural needs. Although people's perceptions of social isolation and belonging vary by individual, markers of isolation have often remained stagnant and fixed in research. Thus, this research aims to reconcile this issue by examining how older people are able to find social connectedness through a participatory process, wherein older people are able to articulate their views around what it means to connect and participate in society.

## **EXAMINING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND BELONGING**

To obtain greater understanding on why and how older people feel social connectedness, past research has often opted for structured questionnaires to identify factors in fostering a socially enabling environment. Since this research is intended to be part of a broader examination of social connectedness and belonging amongst older people in LMCs, it is critical to note that although Moldova was selected for the pilot

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<sup>33</sup> Gorman, Jones, and Turner. "Older People, Mobility and Transport in Low- and Middle-Income Countries."

study, the research was designed and methodologies were selected based on the understanding that the intention is to later scale this research to other LMCs.

In total, 51 older people across 12 villages and districts participated in the study, encompassing a diverse set of participants from different geographical locations, ages, and genders, among other identities. A verbal consent form was read over the phone before conducting the survey questionnaires to ensure that the respondents were aware of the research and had the opportunity to opt out of the survey at any time. The questionnaire was broken down into two main sections with the first section covering individual characteristics, living arrangements, and disabilities, and the second section covering how survey respondents value certain elements in their life in feeling a sense of belonging. The questionnaire sought to understand how older people value particular things, people, and amenities in their lives to feel a sense of social connectedness. The latter section provided an opportunity for respondents to provide open-ended and unrestricted ability to vocalize whether and how they feel a sense of belonging in their communities, and what could be done to improve their ability to socially connect.

To ensure culturally relevant questions and examples in the survey, a virtual research training was conducted wherein country staff from HelpAge Moldova were informed of research aims and methodological approaches. This allowed for a co-collaborative process between HQ and Moldova country staff, where amendments to the survey design were adapted to the national context. Due to the current situation of COVID-19, the research study did not implement a systematic technique to sample survey participants. It was thus necessary for HelpAge country staff to respect government restrictions around physical distancing by opting for a non-probability

sampling technique. This sample technique was based on convenience and who was most accessible to the Moldova country staff, as well as voluntary response based on the willingness of local people to partake in the survey questionnaires.

Afterwards, the questionnaire responses were coded into thematic trends, with particular attention to how different identity groups, and the intersections of identities, allowed for older people to find meaning and belonging in similar or dissimilar ways. Specific attention was paid to analyzing the data from a gendered and intersectional angle, to raise new narratives on how those who are marginalized under multiple metrics find meaning-making out of their lives. Identifying these emerging themes allowed for recommendations on how successful practices of social connectedness can inform civil society organizations (CSO) and government programmatic activities in building a participatory and enabling environment for older people. Lastly, these findings paved the way for outlining the areas in which older peoples' rights can be better attended to by looking at missing services and responsibilities of local administration, NGOs, and family relationships that lead to social isolation experienced by specific people within older communities.

### ***Ethics and Limitations***

Although the selected sampling technique is easier to amass survey responses, there are a few limitations and sampling risks of over-generalization and lack of systematic rigor in data collection. However, the purposes of this research are not to make statistical inferences about the whole population, but rather attempt to understand through an exploratory study how older people disaggregated by various identities come

to understand and explore ideas around social connectedness and belonging. Since the way in which older people come to find belonging can be highly varied even within a particular identity group, like women or ethnic minority groups, this research does not universalize a standardized understanding of social connectedness amongst older people, but attempts to reveal new narratives around the different complexities shaping experiences around belonging.

Furthermore, to minimize ethical concerns in research that have previously co-opted older peoples' voices and determined their futures for them, this methodology opts for a participatory approach that recognizes and respects the dignity and agency of older people as active members of communities with diverse needs, goals, and ambitions. Surveys enabled bi-directional dialogue which allowed older people to voice the changes needed in their lives and environment to ensure full participation in society.

## **AGEING IN MOLDOVA**

The Republic of Moldova is home to over 4 million people, with just over 40% of its population living in urban settings. With an average life expectancy of 72 years, Moldova is expected to face a population decline, with the proportion of the population of 60 years and over projected to increase from 18% in 2015 to 23.4% by the year 2035.<sup>34</sup> The increased representation of Moldova's ageing population relative to their total population, in conjunction with their absolute national population decline has thus

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<sup>34</sup> Gagauz, Olga and Buciuceau-Vrabie, Mariana. 2015. "Active Ageing Index in the Republic of Moldova Presentation." Centre for Demographic Research 1-10.

presented new questions and reflections on how government policies and service provisions are to adapt to these demographic transitions in the coming years.<sup>35</sup>

Understanding of ageing and older peoples' care in Moldova is increasingly becoming a point of government concern. Consequently, interventions to sensitize the Moldovan population on the importance of active ageing with and for older people has been an integral part of the 2017-2021 National Road Map on Mainstream Ageing.<sup>36</sup> Primarily, the national government has implemented initiatives to promote ageing issues into all policy areas, ensure the full participation of older people in society, improve older peoples' quality of life, and operate in the interests of older communities.

Transitions to improve older peoples' rights come through a three-fold process: 1) improve older peoples' agency at the individual level to secure a healthy and independent life, 2) build a society that enables older people to participate in social life, and 3) create enabling environments where healthy ageing and physical and mental well-being is upheld.<sup>37</sup> In particular, the last effort involves improving social connectedness for older people as a part of the active ageing program in Moldova, although the measure of social connectedness is currently limited to statistical calculations, rather than centring older peoples' voices as a part of the process.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, to fill this void, the following research project brings older peoples' narratives to the fore by soliciting understandings of how older people come to find meaning and purpose in their communities. Upon identifying the areas that enable older

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<sup>35</sup> Buciuceanu-Vrabie, Mariana. 2016. "Active Ageing Index in the Republic of Moldova." *National Institute for Economic Research Policy Paper*: 1-8.

<sup>36</sup> Gagauz and Buciuceanu-Vrabie. "Active Ageing Index in the Republic of Moldova Presentation."

<sup>37</sup> Buciuceanu-Vrabie. "Active Ageing Index in the Republic of Moldova."

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



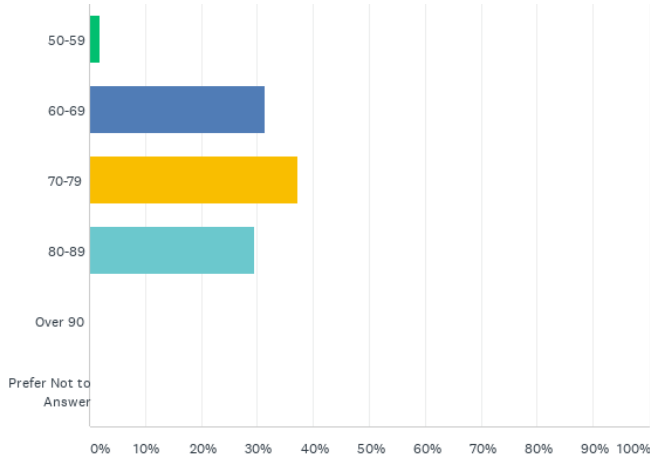
people, disaggregated by various metrics, such as ethnicity, age, gender, sexual identity, and citizenship, to experience and come to find meaning-making out of their daily lives, areas for redress were equally identified. These areas of concern are then ultimately concluded with recommendations to policymakers, researchers, and civil society organizations (CSOs) on how they can operationalize these recommendations.

### ***Key Findings***

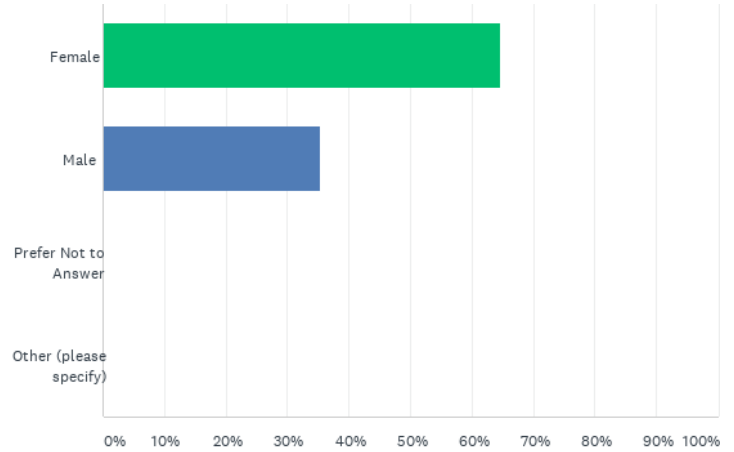
Since successful social connectedness involves the pursuit for everyone to have the opportunity to belong, this research involved examining how the intersections between ethnicity, citizenship, language, gender, residential area, disability, living arrangements and marital status, and employment status, informed older people's ability to feel a sense of belonging. This was then contextualized within their built environment to determine whether government services, local administrations, CSOs, and interpersonal community networks fostered or deterred an ability to belong.

The age range of survey respondents varied between the 50-90 age bracket, with most respondents falling between 70 and 79 years of age. Of the 51 surveyed, there was a higher representation of women vis-à-vis male respondents, with 33 of the surveys completed by women and 18 by men. Most people lived in rural areas, encompassing over 78% of total respondents, with just under 22% living in urban areas, in the villages and cities of Sadaclia, Cazangic, Ciniseuti, Carabetovca, Tareuca, Soldanesti, Rezina, Raspopeni, Iordanavoca, Abaclia, Sarata Noua, and Cupcui.

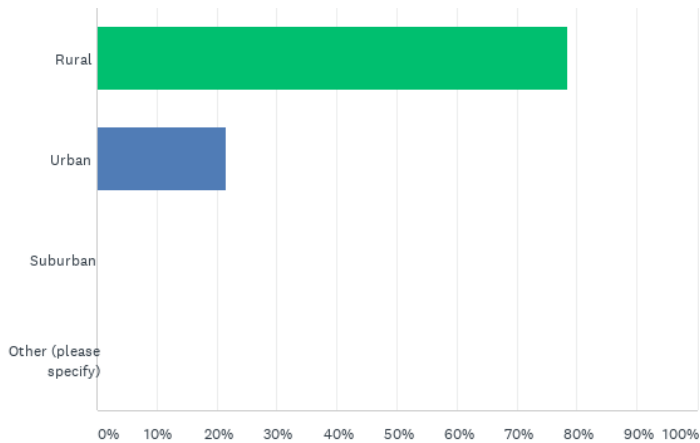
**FIGURE 1: AGE REPRESENTATION**



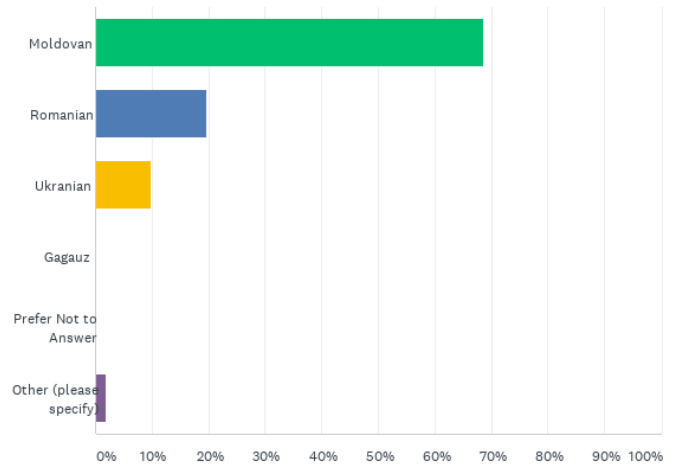
**FIGURE 2: GENDER REPRESENTATION**



**FIGURE 3: GEOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION**



**FIGURE 4: ETHNIC REPRESENTATION**



***Ethnic and National Identity***

Since there has been significant research on the impact of ethnic identification in producing social alienation and forcible integration in the community, assessing how older people experience and understand belonging based on their ethnic identity would

provide nuanced understanding of how older people build communities around them, seek out particular services and amenities, and feel successfully integrated. In the research study, 68% identified as Moldovan, 20% as Romanian, 10% as Ukrainian, and 2% as Roma. Despite their varied migration paths, all respondents identified as citizens of Moldova. Yet despite past studies pointing to older people from ethnic minority backgrounds experiencing greater social isolation due to stigma and discrimination, survey responses reflected how there was no distinction between how Moldovan, Romanian, Ukrainian, or Roma people understood and valued social connectedness, or how they felt as though they belonged.

Instead, open-ended questions of the survey raised the importance of citizenship. While some respondents noted how their Moldovan citizenship, which secured them the right to vote, fostered a sense of community and national belonging, others refuted this claim. Instead, critics of this idea noted how older communities were only reached out to during election seasons, to secure their vote. Those who felt a high degree of social connectedness and belonging typically alluded to their citizenship in the open responses, noting how their ability to vote and participate in political processes allowed them to feel greater belonging.

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

*– Widowed and Retired Moldovan Man in Rural Cupcui*

***“I feel that at this age the local public administration has forgotten about us. Only at elections do they remember the elderly.”***

*– Widowed and Retired Romanian Woman in Urban Soldanesti*

Pre-survey discussions raised potential concerns over linguistic discrimination faced by Russian language speakers in Moldova due to the enduring sentiments from the post-Soviet era. Although there were some concerns that inquiring about the primary language spoken might impact later survey responses, this question was mutually agreed upon as an important question and ultimately did not vastly affect the population sample. Approximately 88% of respondents spoke Romanian, the official language of Moldova, and less than 10% spoke Russian, and 2% spoke Ukrainian. However, despite this anticipated stigma, the survey responses indicated that there was no impact of language spoken, with Russian-speaking respondents disclosing that they feel as though they belong equally with others, due to family and community networks and their physical ability to move around their village.

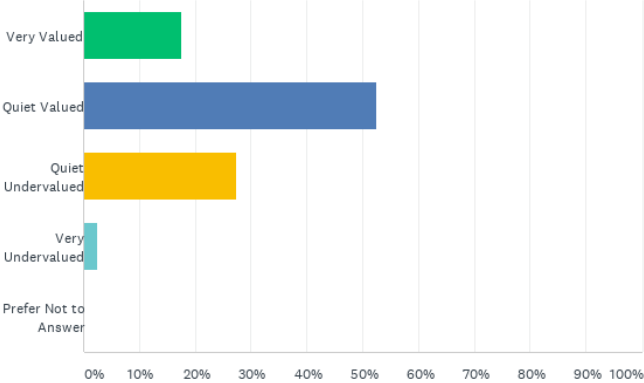
### ***Micro-Scale Activities***

There are a few notable trends emerging from this study. Most older people, regardless of their age, felt as though individual activities, such as household chores were mildly important or important, often placing greater emphasis on leisure activities and hobbies, particularly those who were retired. Respondents spoke to how their individual leisure activities were determined by the individual, and thus reveal how providing older people with greater agency in determining how they find comfort in their daily lives, increases their chances of feeling a sense of belonging. Additionally, older people had mixed feelings on the value they placed on established cultural and ethnic events, like village days or religious ceremonies at the Church, with some attributing high importance to attending these events while others responded with indifference.

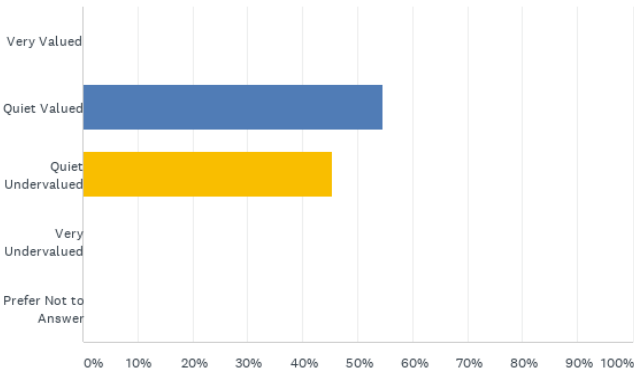
**Geographical Residence**

A notable finding of the survey questionnaire is that the value placed on individual activities such as leisure events and hobbies, cultural events, and household chores is contingent on residence. Those who lived in rural areas found that these hobbies and activities were more important than urban residents. Furthermore, while both demographic groups equally placed a high emphasis on interpersonal relationships between family members and neighbours in their community and left their residence an equal number of times to interact with non-family members, those living in the city often felt as though older people in their community were moderately valued or undervalued, and prioritized safety as a critical aspect in feeling socially connected. Conversely, their countryside counterparts were more likely to feel more valued by their village members, and felt as though safety was less of an issue to feeling a sense of belonging.

**HOW MUCH ARE OLDER PEOPLE VALUED IN YOUR COMMUNITY?**



**FIGURE 5: RURAL RESIDENTS RESPONSES**



**FIGURE 6: URBAN RESIDENTS RESPONSES**

The isolation faced by urban residents is further corroborated when rural residential respondents disclosed in greater depth how knowledge of and relationships with everyone in the community allowed them to develop social relationships and connection. Regardless of geographical location, age, marital status, or living arrangements however, older people valued and assessed their family relationships as healthy and robust, though those who lost their partners and children in their lives emphasized the importance of non-family member relationship with greater value.

### ***Physical Abilities and Impairments***

Moreover, this study revealed how particular impairments or reductions in functional ability, such as the limited ability to walk or climb the stairs, deterred older people from engaging in activities that foster greater belonging. Those who struggled to walk reflected that they only ranked the importance of physical and cultural spaces as less important after their physical health started to decline. However, when they had the capabilities to access these spaces, they valued them with greater significance. Survey respondents often elaborated in the open-ended discussions that many of them have lost friends and family, suffer from chronic health conditions and have cognitive impairments, and live with co-morbidities, making it nearly impossible for them to make use of the resources that may be available in their villages in the first place. In this particular case, it is clear that issues of *access* become not only a critical aspect to research but also reflects the importance of reshaping policies and programmatic interventions that cater to older people living with disabilities.

## ***Government Services***

Regardless of geographical residence, age, gender, disability, citizenship, living arrangement, sexual identity, or religious belief, all respondents believe that government services are at least somewhat important, with most survey participants placing large emphasis and value on government services in establishing social connectedness. However, open-ended responses denote how government services are lacking in all geographies wherein this study was conducted. Often, respondents suggested that services could be improved by creating public spaces that allow for greater socialization between older people in the village centre, financial investment in improving plumbing and water systems - to help them feel secure and increasing disability-sensitive transportation lines to transport older people to sociable spaces. However, those with higher income or those who did not express financial burdens were able to circumvent these issues by building roads or infrastructure with their own finances to mitigate these issues. While this enables relatively higher-income older people to access public spaces and pursue hobbies and costly activities, this research demonstrates how low-income older people, particularly those with disabilities, are further marginalized and have no option to engage in activities that they understand carry potential to foster belonging.

## ***An Intersectional Analysis***

Despite these robust findings, linking these factors individually to older people's ability to socially connect fails to understand the multi-constitutive ways in which factors of mobility are reinforced by health, social engagement, living arrangements, citizenship, and gender. While past research has focused on the causal link between individual identity traits and social isolation, the following section discusses how the

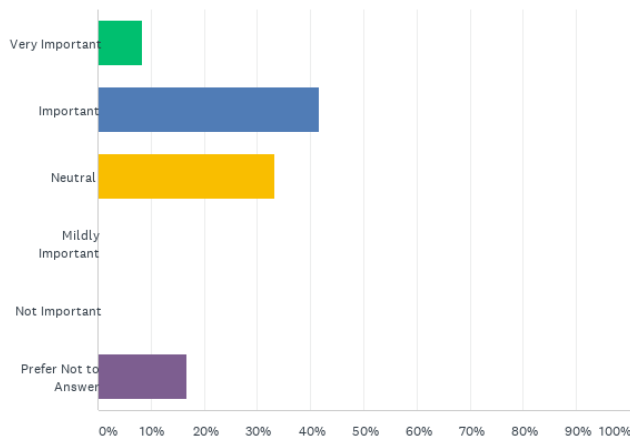
intersections between these traits are mutually informing the ability of older people to access opportunities that help them feel a greater sense of social connectedness. Since this research implemented a coding analysis from a gendered angle, this research delineates how men and women respondents differed in the way they conceived of social connectedness and belonging, with attention to the intersections of their gender with other individual characteristics. In this section, this report does not create a dichotomous woman-man binary in its analysis, rather uses a gendered analysis as the entry point through which it unpacks how the intersectionality of individual identities, built environment, and interpersonal networks work in tandem to determine how individuals find meaning-making and belonging in their lives.

One pertinent difference between men's and women's responses were their living arrangements in informing their ability to feel socially connected. While individual traits such as retired employment status, Moldovan citizenship, heterosexual identity, mostly rural residency, and diverse age ranges were parallel in both gender groups, 67% of male respondents are married living with their partner, whereas 67% of women reported living alone. Men and women were equally disproportionately retired, with many of them having the same disabilities, mostly in the realm of visual impairments and difficulties climbing and walking up the stairs. One central commonality that existed regardless of gender was that respondents were equally split on how their community values older people, with half of the respondents noting that older people are 'quite valued' while others responded as feeling 'quite undervalued.' However, the reasons behind why these divisions exist by identity is still unknown.

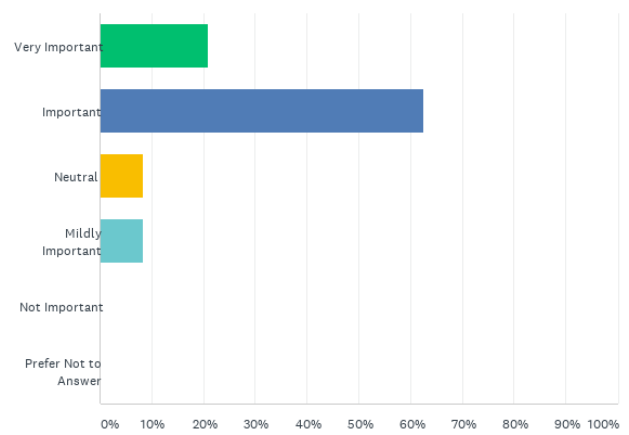


Male respondents, particularly married men who live with their spouses, valued household chores with greater value than leisure or community activities that fostered outside family relationships, such as handicraft clubs, cycling groups, village days, and music clubs at the church. By contrast, while women also valued household chores to the same depth as their male counterparts, women who live alone placed much greater value on community-wide events and hobbies, such as handicraft clubs, gardening, and village and religious events, and found finances to play a large role in their ability to pursue these engagements.

**HOW IMPORTANT IS ENGAGING IN LEISURE ACTIVITIES (E.G. GARDENING, READING GROUPS, HANDICRAFT CLUBS, MUSIC CLUBS, CYCLING) TO FEEL SOCIALLY CONNECTED?**

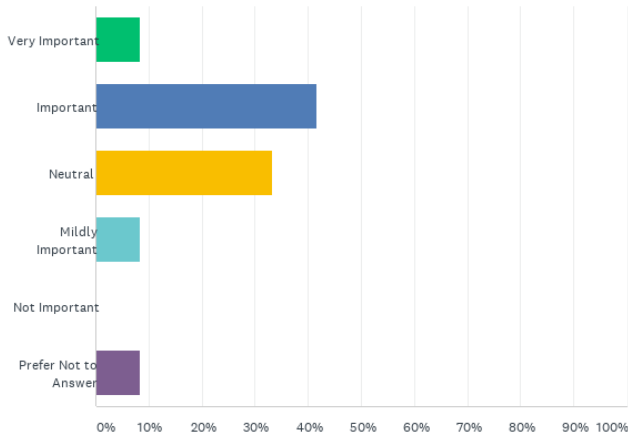


**FIGURE 7: MARRIED MEN RESPONSES**

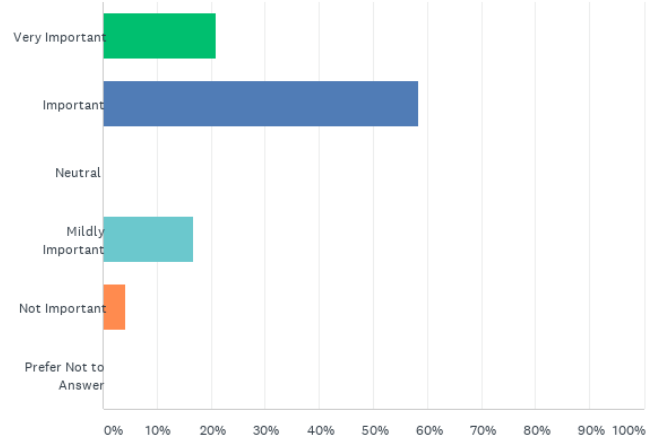


**FIGURE 8: SINGLE WOMEN RESPONSES**

**HOW IMPORTANT IS ENGAGING IN ETHNIC AND CULTURAL COMMUNITY GROUPS AND EVENTS (E.G. CULTURAL HOUSE, VILLAGE DAYS) TO FEEL SOCIALLY CONNECTED?**



**FIGURE 9: MARRIED MEN RESPONSES**



**FIGURE 10: SINGLE WOMEN RESPONSES**

Married men and women also valued their family relationships more than their neighbours. However, because many women respondents live alone and lost their partners and children, women disclosed that they experience higher degrees of loneliness and consequently face less physical contact with family or non-family members in their community. However, men who are not married expressed that they value these community events and leisure activities with greater importance, similarly to the responses of widowed women. Herein, they described that their relationships with friends and neighbours were more important than those within their immediate family, and affirmed that services offered by the local government, such as hosting events, are critical to convene older people.

Lastly, the amount of time spent in the community commonly informed the likelihood that older people would experience greater social connectedness and

belonging. Those who resided in their community for many years had a reputation as a contributing member to society as former teachers and local counsellors, with their positive standing in society carrying significance even after they stopped engaging in formal activities. Particularly for rural areas, this resulted in village members arranging visits to older women and men with widowed status or isolated living arrangements, thus alleviating their social isolation and loneliness. This reveals how the central theme of time spent in the community dictated external village response in ensuring that older people, especially widowed or alone older women and men, felt like they belonged and connected with their wider community in the absence of family presence.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPACT**

This study informed several areas for improvement and lessons learned about the way older communities find meaning-making and belonging in their communities. To mitigate some of these concerns that result in some demographic groups within older populations prone to social isolation, there are several key recommendations that would encourage a sustainable process for older people to feel greater belonging:

### ***Policy and Project Implementation in Moldova***

- 1) This research revealed how older peoples' ability to access events and government services depended on whether they had access to transportation to these convening spaces. HelpAge Moldova staff and local administration should examine local policies that determine whether there are adequate transportation services that enable older people to access services and events that are highly valued by older people.

- 2) HelpAge Moldova in collaboration with village-level government officials should discuss with older people in local communities the barriers behind peoples' participation in society (e.g. financial constraints, physical impairments, lack of community friendships) to better inform project interventions and demand greater local services.
- 3) To address issues of access, policies and projects should have greater transportation services and financial investment into infrastructure that allow older people to reach village centres and get them outside of the household, as well as create disability-friendly modes of transportation and meeting hubs. Specifically, local administrations can work in tandem with HelpAge Moldova's country staff and local coordinators to identify local transportation routes that would enable older people to their larger communities.

**IMPACT:** Older people in the communities will be able to have the opportunity to engage in social life with other members of the community through increased access and opportunities to spaces that foster social connectedness and belonging through HelpAge intervention.

### ***Upscaling Research on a Transnational Scale***

- 1) While this research has paid great attention to how gender interplays in understanding social connectedness, there is still research lacking on the intersectionality of social connectedness. The lack of demographic diversity of respondents reflects how research should specifically address how different

communities within older people understand social connectedness and belonging. Purposive sampling in future methodologies can enable for greater demographic diversity in survey questionnaire participation.

- 2) While survey responses may be useful in identifying the existence of services, events, and amenities for older people to feel a sense of belonging, the survey questionnaire should specifically ask qualitative and open-ended questions explaining how individual arrangements and identity traits make it possible for older people to achieve higher degrees of social connectedness than others.
- 3) Open-ended responses in the research provided how time spent in the community allowed them to feel accepted by their larger community even after retirement. Thus, future research should interrogate the length of time older people lived in their current community and their participation in it as a part of the survey questionnaire (e.g. their occupation pre-retirement and length of time spent in community).
- 4) When upscaling this research in the future, HelpAge International should triangulate findings with focus group discussions with various identity groups for qualitative analysis on the individual conditions that enable their attainment of social connectedness and belonging. This research encapsulated how older people come to value particular elements of their life in feeling socially connected but did not explain why, thus requiring further research attention.

**IMPACT:** Improving research through these aforementioned means will also allow HelpAge International to develop a more intersectional analysis of how diverse

respondents, such as older LGBTQ+, migrant or ethnic minority, and religious minority communities feel as though they belong. SCSC could raise these new understandings and centre the voices of marginalized older people through continued collaborative research with HelpAge and communication products for public awareness.

### ***Formalizing Community-Led Initiatives***

- 1) While the overarching differences between communities with strong formal government services, interpersonal relationships, finances, and individual living arrangements significantly determined how older communities can socially connect, this research underscores that bifurcating between micro and macro structures informing social connectedness fails to understand how the two relate to each other. For instance, those who were living alone or had a declining state in health typically had less access to health services and social contact, reflecting how institutional measures were lacking to provide older people with the necessary provisions to keep them physically and mentally at ease. However, despite this, their longstanding community reputation allowed for those from the village to visit older people in their homes, to ensure that their isolation is minimal. Greater attention to how communities and villages circumvent issues of lacking services and local investment to overcome barriers of social isolation and lack of belonging are critical lessons for how organizations like HelpAge can amplify these community-led initiatives for greater impact.
- 2) This research demonstrates how many rural villages are highly underfunded, and moving forward, it is important to realize that many LMCs may possess the same

difficulties. The study explained how older people with resources such as income and their surrounding communities were able to work their way around lacking services that attend to older peoples' needs in a display of resilience and community care. Capitalizing on these activities, CSOs like HelpAge Moldova, local administration, and other networks devoted to older peoples rights' in Moldova should also consider formalizing these informal practices by creating formalized helpline circles, community groups for retired older men and women, and village volunteer units and coordinators that work to help with transportation access for older people to engage in community and leisure activities with greater ease.

**IMPACT:** By identifying the informal channels through which older people are securing belonging and resilience in their societies (e.g. community groups, informal check-ins) through research, multi-stakeholder dialogue, and focus group discussions, HelpAge Moldova can work with local administration to formalize these channels to ensure that all older people can feel like they have the opportunity to belong. SCSC can also raise public awareness on how despite the deeply-rooted discrimination enacted against older people, community-led initiatives can serve as sources of inspiration on how older people can be included in society.

## CONCLUSION

This exploratory research ultimately provided extensive and thorough examination on how individual circumstances such as loss of their partners, eroded

family relationships, and group belonging, and local resources available to older population impact conceptions of belonging and connectedness. The intersections of older peoples' identities reflect how those who experienced multiple levels of marginalization or suffering at the individual, interpersonal, or structural level were more likely to feel as though they do not belong. Yet despite this, local communities still carry the potential to work alongside older people to alleviate their loneliness and engage them in community practices to foster a communal sense of belonging.

Future research led by organizations such as SCSC and HelpAge, who focus on older peoples' rights by centering their voices, should continue further participatory action research to capture a holistic analysis of how older people are able to find identity-specific belonging, wherein they are able to imagine and describe what a society that is fully participatory and socially connected looks like. Ultimately, this research offers critical contributions and findings that are of pertinent use to future organizational and scholarly work.

Given forthcoming difficulties and imminent issues of grappling with older people's rights amidst timely issues such as COVID-19, which have shown how there is rampant human rights abuses committed against older people, it is critical that there are necessary measures put into place to safeguard older peoples' rights and ability to feel socially integrated, accepted, and connected in their communities. With discussions around social connectedness and belonging increasingly reaching the fore amongst multi-stakeholders, this gives hope that society can move towards a collective process to ensure that everyone can exercise their basic human rights at the fundamental core.



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