

CALL FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship

University of Birmingham | ILO STREAM Programme

RESEARCH THEME

Social Protection and Labour Migration along South–South Corridors to the GCC

Partnership	School of Social Policy and Society, University of Birmingham (UK) & ILO STREAM Programme
Fellowship Scheme	Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship (MSCA-PF) (European and Global Schemes)
Secondment	6 months in an ILO or an ILO partner's office within the South Asia–GCC Corridor as a visiting scholar
Application Deadline (and additional relevant deadlines)	<p>There are two shortlisting stages:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Submission of Eol (1st stage): 15 June 2026; if shortlisted by the initial call organisers (Dr. Michele Scala and Prof. Rana Jawad), progression to:2. Submission of Eol (2nd stage): 1 July 2026; if shortlisted by the University internal selection process, progression to full submission on 9 September 20273. Short-listed candidates for the Eol 1st stage will be invited for an online interview with Dr. Michele Scala and Prof. Rana Jawad on 17 or 18 June 2026 (please reserve these dates if you intend to apply)
Eligibility	Marie-Curie Post-Doctoral Scheme (Global or European) – no more than 8 years Post-Doc and mobility rules apply (for visa status)

The MENASP Network at the School of Social Policy and Society, University of Birmingham and the ILO STREAM programme are inviting expressions of interest from experienced, ambitious and self-motivated candidates seeking to develop their skills through training and mobility opportunities, to apply for an internal selection process at the University of Birmingham (UK) for the subsequent development of a Marie Curie Post-Doctoral Scheme proposal. The research theme for this application is:

Wage Protection, Social Security, and Labour Migration along South–South Corridors to the GCC.

Successful candidates will be provided technical support in developing a grant proposal for the Marie Curie Post-Doctoral scheme. It is the responsibility of the candidate to check that they meet the eligibility criteria of the MSCA scheme before applying. They will be embedded in the MENASP network and ILO STREAM Programmes as part of the fellowship. Applications should clearly specify if they are targeting the Global or European funding schemes.

1. Background and Rationale

Labour migration is one of the most dynamic and consequential global phenomena of our time. With over 167.7 million international migrant workers worldwide, its socioeconomic implications span

national borders, political systems, and generations. The Arab States host the highest proportion of migrants in their labour force globally — 37.2% — and GCC countries alone account for approximately three-quarters of all migrants and refugees in the region ([ILO 2024](#)), the overwhelming majority of whom are migrant workers ([UNDESA, 2020](#)). These figures underscore both the demographic weight of the South-South migration corridors to GCC and its centrality as an observatory for broader global migration trends and policy challenges.

Despite a substantial and growing body of scholarship on international labour migration, the interlinkages between labour migration and social protection remain comparatively underexplored. The protection of migrant workers across their life cycle — from pre-departure through active employment to return and retirement — requires comprehensive frameworks that bridge wage protection, occupational safety, social protection, and cross-border portability mechanisms. Labour migration corridors are not static: the growing presence of second- and third-generation migrants born at destination, families that straddle multiple countries across generations, and workers who move repeatedly between origin and destination countries are generating new and increasingly complex social protection needs. These dynamics call for a life-cycle approach capable of capturing the full arc of migration and its social protection implications.

The GCC region has in recent years undertaken significant systemic reforms to its wage and social protection frameworks. Yet policy developments differ markedly across countries in scope, institutional architecture, and alignment with International Labour Standards (ILS) and International Social Security Standards (ISSS). Translating legal and systemic change into effective protection on the ground remains a gradual and deeply uneven process — particularly for the most vulnerable migrant workers, including domestic workers, platform-based workers, and those in irregular status. The labour market governance framework inherited from the *kafala* (sponsorship) system continues to cast a long shadow over access to rights, services, and benefits.

Against this backdrop of ongoing reform, recent regional conflicts have acted as a diagnostic stress-test, revealing the resilience — and more often the fragility — of existing systems. Crises of this kind exacerbate rather than substantially create longstanding structural challenges: they expose gaps in employment injury compensation, death benefits, unemployment protection, end-of-service entitlements, and the near-total absence of effective cross-border social security coordination and portability. Origin-country responses, including migrant workers' welfare funds, can partially cushion some shocks, but are ill-equipped to substitute for incomplete or inaccessible social protection systems at destination. Community-based support networks, historically a vital safety net, are themselves increasingly overstretched and unable alone to meet the life-cycle needs of expanding and diversifying migrant populations.

These dynamics are further shaped by divergent trajectories of capitalist development in origin and destination regions. The political economies of GCC states — historically reliant on migrant labour as a structurally temporary, largely rightless workforce — have produced social protection architectures that were not designed with long-term inclusion of migrant workers in mind. The shift towards more diversified, digitalised economies, including the rapid growth of platform and gig work, is generating new forms of employment that sit uneasily within existing regulatory and protection frameworks, often placing workers in legal grey zones with limited or no recourse to formal protection.

Addressing these challenges requires not only new evidence but new research approaches. Embedding research within South-South to GCC migration corridors — working across and between origin and destination countries — enables a genuinely corridor-based perspective that moves beyond methodological regionalism and captures the interconnected nature of migration governance. It also creates opportunities to strengthen South–South research collaboration, decolonise research practice by centering the voices and priorities of migrant communities and civil society organisations, and generate knowledge that is grounded in the lived realities of migration rather than abstracted from it.

2. Research Themes and Priority Areas

This call invites research proposals that advance understanding of the interlinkages between labour migration, social protection and wage protection, along South–South corridors to the GCC (Arab, African and South Asian countries), with a particular emphasis on the South Asia–GCC corridor. Proposals should adopt a rights-based and participatory approach grounded in international labour and social security standards and should be designed to generate evidence capable of informing concrete policy change.

Proposals may address one or more of the following thematic areas, and are encouraged to develop cross-cutting and comparative perspectives:

2.1 Life-Cycle Approaches to Social Protection in Migration

- Frameworks for understanding social protection needs across the full migration life cycle — from pre-departure through employment, return, and retirement — and the structural gaps that leave workers unprotected at key transition points.
- The social protection implications of multi-generational migration, including for workers raised and educated at destination, families that span origin and destination countries across generations, and workers who alternate between countries throughout their working lives.
- Mechanisms for accumulation, portability, and transferability of social security entitlements (pensions, employment injury, health, and other benefits) across borders, and the barriers to their effective implementation in the GCC context.
- Barriers hampering effective access to existing legal and regulatory social protection frameworks, including administrative obstacles, lack of information, language barriers, employer dependency, and fear of retaliation — with attention to how these barriers compound across the migration life cycle

2.2 Wage Protection and Social Protection Systems Linkages

- Assessment of Wage Protection Systems (WPS) in GCC countries and their interaction with social protection frameworks: how wage arrears, underpayment, and delayed payment cascade into workers' inability to access or contribute to social security schemes, and the extent to which both systems align with International Labour Standards.
- The relationship between labour market governance — including kafala-derived frameworks and ongoing reforms — employer liability schemes, and workers' practical access to both wage and social protection entitlements: how structural power imbalances at the workplace level shape the gap between formal rights and effective protection.

- Cross-border dimensions of wage and social protection: recruitment fees, debt bondage, and wage deductions that erode the income base on which social security contributions and remittances depend; and the role of origin-country regulation — including welfare funds and pre-departure schemes — in shaping workers' economic resilience and their ability to claim entitlements at destination and upon return.

2.3 Social Security Coordination Across Borders

- Bilateral and multilateral labour migration and social security agreements in the South Asia–GCC corridor: scope, implementation gaps, and the conditions under which they can be made effective.
- The role of origin-country institutions — including welfare funds, insurance schemes, and diaspora-facing agencies — in supplementing destination-country systems, and the limits of unilateral approaches.
- Emerging models of cross-border social protection: lessons from other corridors (e.g. Africa) and their potential applicability in the GCC context.

2.4 Emerging and Underprotected Forms of Employment

- Emerging forms of employment, such as platform work, gig economy, and de facto self-employment: regulatory status, social protection coverage, and the specific vulnerabilities of migrant workers in these sectors.
- Domestic work, hospitality, and other sectors characterised by high concentrations of migrant workers and historically weak regulatory coverage.
- Informal employment and irregular status: how these arrangements shape access to social protection and wage entitlements, and what policy frameworks can address this without penalising workers.

2.5 Gender, Intersectionality, and Differential Vulnerability

- Gendered dimensions of social protection in migration: differential access to entitlements, the intersection of unpaid care work with formal protection systems, and the specific situation of women migrant workers in feminised sectors.
- Intersectional analysis of vulnerability: how nationality, sector, contractual status, gender, and other cross-cutting individual features shape differential access to decent work and social protection.

2.6 Policy Innovation, Governance, and System Reform

- Analysis of ongoing social protection and labour market reforms in destination and origin countries: drivers, scope, institutional architecture, and alignment with International Labour Standards and International Social Security Standards.
- The role of International Organisations, inter-regional dialogue processes (such as the Abu Dhabi Dialogue and the Doha Dialogue processes), civil society, and community-based initiatives in shaping and implementing social protection frameworks for migrant workers.
- Evidence-based policy recommendations for making social protection systems more inclusive, adequate, portable, and resilient — including proposals that can generate actionable insights for reform processes currently underway.

3. Research Approach and Embedded Methodology

Proposals should be grounded in rigorous social science methodology and should be attentive to the political and institutional context in which research will be conducted. Applicants are encouraged to adopt approaches that are:

- Corridor-based and comparative, moving beyond single-country or regional studies to capture the multi-sited nature of migration and the governance arrangements that span origin and destination countries.
- Rights-based and policy-oriented, with an explicit focus on generating evidence capable of informing reform processes aligned with International Labour Standards and International Social Security Standards.
- Gender-responsive and intersectional, recognising that social protection gaps are not experienced uniformly across migrant populations. Proposals should analyse how gender shapes access to wage and social protection entitlements — including the specific situation of women in feminised sectors such as domestic work — and how intersecting factors such as nationality, contractual status, migration generation, and sector compound differential vulnerability and exclusion.
- Participatory where feasible, with attention to giving visibility and voice to migrant workers and their communities, including through engagement with community-based organisations and civil society actors, while applying rigorous ethical standards that protect structurally vulnerable participants from exposure, retaliation, or harm.
- Attentive to decolonial research practice, strengthening South–South collaboration and centering perspectives and knowledge systems from origin and destination regions while developing analytical frameworks.
- Life-cycle sensitive, tracking how protection needs, entitlements, and vulnerabilities evolve across different stages of the migration trajectory.

The shortlisted candidate will proceed to the 2nd stage of the internal selection process which involves submitting their EoI to an internal pool at the University of Birmingham (1 July deadline). In the case of obtention of a Marie Curie Post-Doctoral Global Fellowship, the successful candidate will be expected to spend six months at an ILO office within the South Asia–GCC corridor or in one of the ILO research partners centres based in the corridor, as part of a structured visiting scholar arrangement. At the University of Birmingham, they will be embedded in the MENASP network (www.menasp.com) and will benefit from a wide range of career development opportunities at the University. They will also have access to one of the world's leading migration centres, located in the School of Social Policy and Society (IRIS). This placement will enable the researcher to leverage the ILO STREAM Programme's extended network of research partner institutions, government counterparts, employers' and workers' organisations, and community-based organisations across the corridor. The secondment as visiting scholar is designed not merely as a logistical arrangement but as a substantive methodological opportunity: embedding the research within the corridor, building relationships with key actors, accessing data and documentation that cannot easily be obtained remotely, and contributing to the broader ILO research and policy agenda in this space.

By positioning the research at the intersection of academic scholarship and international policy development, this fellowship aims to produce knowledge that is both scientifically rigorous and practically actionable — contributing to the evidence base needed to advance rights-based social protection for migrant workers along South–South corridors.

4. Aims and Expected Contributions

Proposals should respond to two complementary and mutually reinforcing aims:

- **To produce high-quality, evidence-based knowledge and data** that can foster rights-based social protection policies for migrant workers along South–South corridors to the GCC, directly contributing to ongoing reform processes and to the ILO STREAM Programme's policy objectives.
- **To stimulate independent, sustained academic research** in an underexplored but critically important field — developing the researcher's profile, network, and capacity to generate long-term impact through continued engagement with this agenda beyond the fellowship period.

The research is expected to make contributions across several dimensions:

- **Analytical:** advancing theoretical and empirical understanding of the interlinkages between labour migration, wage protection, and social protection, including through the development or application of a life-cycle analytical framework.
- **Policy:** generating actionable insights for reform of social protection and wage protection systems in GCC countries and in countries of origin, with explicit attention to alignment with International Labour Standards and International Social Security Standards.
- **Methodological:** developing and demonstrating corridor-based, South–South research approaches that can be replicated and built upon by future researchers in this field.
- **Societal:** giving visibility and voice to the experiences of migrant workers and their communities, including through engagement with community-based organisations and civil society actors across the corridor.

5. Partnership and Institutional Context

This call is part of an internal pre-selection process run jointly by the University of Birmingham and the ILO STREAM Programme (Extending Social Protection to Migrant Workers and their Families in South Asia and the Middle East). Its purpose is to identify and support a strong candidate to develop a competitive application for a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship under the Horizon Europe programme. Selection through this process does not guarantee funding, which is contingent on the subsequent success of a full MSCA application submitted to the European Research Executive Agency.

Candidates shortlisted through this process will receive dedicated technical support from the call organisers (Dr Michele Scala and Prof Rana Jawad) to develop their EoI application for progression to the second stage of the institutional selection process, entailing submission of their EoI by 1 July

2026 to the University of Birmingham pool. If shortlisted at this stage, they will be supported in preparing and submitting a full, competitive MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship proposal in time for the official April 2027 deadline. This support will include guidance on proposal structure, alignment with MSCA evaluation criteria, and the integration of the partnership and secondment arrangements into the research design.

The ILO STREAM Programme works across the South Asia–GCC corridor to strengthen the institutional capacity of governments, social partners, and civil society organisations to extend social protection to migrant workers and their families. Its work spans policy analysis and advisory support, capacity building, data collection, and community engagement.

Should the MSCA application be successful, the fellowship will be hosted at the University of Birmingham (MENASP network within the School of Social Policy and Society), with a six-month secondment as a visiting scholar at an ILO office within the South Asia–GCC corridor or in one of the ILO research partners centres within the corridor. The specific secondment location will be agreed in consultation with the fellow based on their research focus and the ILO STREAM Programme's operational footprint. The ILO's extended network of research partners, government counterparts, and community-based organisations across the corridor will be available to support fieldwork, data access, and stakeholder engagement during this period.

6. Eligibility

This call is open to experience and self-motivate researchers with a PhD in relevant disciplines and eligible to apply for a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship under the rules of the Horizon Europe programme.

- It is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure they comply with the eligibility rule as stated in the Global and European funding schemes of the MSCA. **The candidate must not be more than 8 years past their PhD qualification date and mobility rules will apply (for visa status)**
- Hold a research background relevant to one or more of the thematic areas outlined in Section 2, including but not limited to migration studies, labour law, social policy, development economics, international relations, anthropology, sociology, or public policy.
- Demonstrate an ability to conduct rigorous, independent research and to engage with policy-relevant audiences.
- Have a demonstrable interest in rights-based approaches to social protection and a commitment to producing research that can contribute to policy change.

Gender-responsive approaches are highly relevant and will be considered a strong asset during the evaluation process. Knowledge of the South Asia–GCC corridor, relevant languages (Arabic, Hindi, Nepali, Bengali, or other relevant languages), or prior experience of working with international organisations or civil society in a migration context will be considered advantageous but are not requirements.

7. Application Process

Expressions of interest should be submitted by email to the contact addresses listed below by 15 June 2026. Applications should include the following documents:

- 1. A curriculum vitae of no more than two pages**, summarising academic qualifications, research experience, and relevant publications or outputs. **The PhD qualification certificate should be included with the CV.**
- 2. A cover letter of no more than two pages** explaining the applicant's career aspirations and suitability for the fellowship, their motivations for applying, and their specific interest in the research theme. Attention should be given to the applicant's fit with and potential contribution to existing research centres and networks at the University of Birmingham, such as the MENSP network (www.menasp.com) and IRIS (Institute for Research into International Migration and Superdiversity - University of Birmingham) as well as to the ILO STREAM programme.
- 3. An outline research proposal of no more than two pages** setting out a brief research design, including research questions, proposed methodology, and how the planned activities relate to the thematic areas of the call. The proposal should also indicate how the applicant envisages making use of the visiting scholar secondment period within the South Asia–GCC corridor.

Shortlisted candidates will be invited and supported by the University of Birmingham and the ILO STREAM Programme team in preparing and submitting a full MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship application to the European Research Executive Agency.

Applications and informal enquiries should be addressed to:

Rana Jawad, Professor of Global Social Policy

University of Birmingham

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ILO STREAM Programme

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