

GLMM and CGAPS Webinar: Aging in the Gulf Countries and Implications for Migration to the Region



Speakers



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Aging in the Gulf Countries and Implications for Migration to the Region Webinar Summary and Key Outcomes

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Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population (GLMM) programme at the Gulf Research Center (GRC) and Center for Gulf and Arabian Studies (CGAPS), Kuwait University Webinar on “Aging in the Gulf Countries and Implications for Migration to the Region.”

This webinar covered the current and possible implications of aging in the Gulf states on migrants and migration dynamics and policies. It also examined how healthcare, labour, and migration policies have adjusted to socio-demographic changes, including the expansion of elderly, non-working resident foreign populations.

Speakers

- **Dr. Luca Maria Pesando**, Associate Professor of Social Research and Public Policy at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYU-AD), UAE
- **Dr. Idil Akıncı Perez**, Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland
- **Dr. Jessica T. Maluch**, Director of Strategy, Research, and Impact at the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research in Ras Al Khaimah, UAE
- **Prof. Nasra M. Shah**, Professor of Migration and Development at the Lahore School of Economics, Pakistan and Scientific Director of GLMM
- **Moderated by: Imco Brouwer**, Managing Director of the GLMM Programme

Presentations

Dr. Luca Maria Pesando

The share of the population over 60 is increasing in all GCC countries with UN projections showing an increase from 4% in 2015 to 21% in 2050 (aggregated population: nationals+non-nationals). Yemen is at an earlier phase of demographic transition, with a younger population than many other countries analyzed here. The UAE and Qatar, on the other hand, are aging more rapidly. By 2050, 65% of the UAE's population is projected to be of working age, while 23.5% will be older. This highlights not only a burden, but a demographic opportunity for working-age populations to support the elderly: old-age dependency ratios in countries like Japan, South Korea, and Italy are projected to reach 60-70% by 2050, far above the UAE's projected 18.5, which will be closer, in 2050, to the current global average.

These demographic transformations bring challenges, such as balancing family life, work, and elderly care, often placing a "triple burden" on women in Gulf countries. Marriage rates are declining, and more women are choosing not to marry or not to have children, impacting fertility rates and the kinship networks available to support the elderly, which increasingly resemble beanpoles rather than bushes. Traditional family reliance, or "familism," is influenced by migration and economic transformations, raising questions about its future role in elder care.

Intermarriage, facilitated by migration, is creating more diversified kinship networks, which could potentially contribute to supporting aging populations. Policies in the Gulf often frame elderly care in terms of human rights and the dignity of "senior citizens," but there is a pressing need to address legal rights for caregivers and support the inclusion of elderly migrants. One often overlooked policy concerns the digital inclusion of elderly migrants. Weak data infrastructure also limits the ability to formulate effective policies.



Dr. Idil Akıncı Perez

Temporary migration systems often assume migrants will return to their countries of origin after retirement, but this is increasingly not the case in the Gulf. Dr. Akıncı's research and publications on the topic show that many migrants, particularly those who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s, have established deep family and community ties in their country of residence over decades and generations. Consequently, "aging in the Gulf" is a preferred option for many, though its future remains uncertain.

Retired migrants face challenges such as securing residency and accessing pensions and healthcare, which are often tied to employment and citizenship. Adult children play a critical role in securing their parents' residency through sponsorship, providing they meet the requirements. However, sponsoring children's own stay is conditional on their financial stability.

For some migrants from unstable regions, returning home is not an option, making Gulf residency their only viable choice. Recent initiatives like retirement visas and optional pension schemes in the UAE (October 2023) are steps forward, but financial requirements exclude those with limited means.

Dr. Jessica Maluch

The results of a survey conducted in the UAE on the implications of aging for migration policies and mapping of senior care indicate that families are primarily responsible for elderly care. Research shows that seniors are highly valued for their knowledge and experience, but perceptions about care responsibilities differ. While many believe care should come from family, others think it should be a government responsibility. Most seniors receive care at home, and aged care facilities are limited and not widely accepted by society.

Despite the passing of Federal Law No. 9 for 2019 on the rights of senior citizens, healthcare gaps are significant, particularly in the northern Emirates, where there is only one geriatric specialist. The commuting of families for work leaves seniors at home with limited care, often provided by domestic helpers without specialized training. This underscores the growing need for a trained eldercare workforce and better healthcare services.

Professor Nasra Shah

Research and the results of a survey conducted in Kuwait reveal that married children's co-residence with parents is declining and extended family units are splitting, due to urban expansion. Consequently, there is increasing reliance on domestic workers for elderly care. Twenty-four percent were living without any co-resident children. Due to longer life expectancy for women than men, elderly men are most often cared for by their spouses, while women rely more on domestic workers.

Depressive symptoms are higher among elderly women, those living without children, and those with chronic illnesses. Functional disabilities are common among older Kuwaitis, with socioeconomic factors like education and income playing a significant role. Migration policies in the Gulf need to address the intersection of aging and labor demands, especially as domestic workers become essential in elderly care.



Panel Discussion

The panelists regretted the lack of comprehensive data on aging and migration in the Gulf, emphasizing the need for more surveys and demographic studies to devise better policies and address increasing needs.

Questions from the Audience

Members of the audience discussed and highlighted gaps in eldercare facilities and future needs in terms of the migrant specialized workforce; Islamic perceptions of family and care for the elderly as explanations for the lack of institutional care facilities; gender-based gaps in life expectancy and in employment making elderly foreign women more dependent than foreign men on children's support to stay in Gulf states; strength of passports as an asset to secure post-retirement stay in Gulf states; the role of the private sector in creating attractive packages as an incentive to attract and retain wealthy expatriates after retirement; perceptions by migrants of new market-based saving schemes in the UAE; processes of reintegration in origin countries; and challenges faced by aging migrants across the region.

Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population (GLMM) Programme

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