



I am from Kenya and have roots in Mali. I run an organisation called Youth Rising which works to educate young people to make informed decisions about voting. Earlier this year, I had an opportunity to submit a concept note for my organisation which was inspired by the ongoing Gen Z protests in Kenya. The concept note aimed to give young people more information besides just going to the streets.

When I look back on my time in the fellowship, I see it as a journey through different seasons — each with its own lessons, emotions, and transformations. August brought a mix of rest and excitement. Being in Cape Town and in this fellowship saw me rest a lot, not just physically but mentally. September unfolded as a period of learning and exploration; and by October, I found myself immersed in networking and grappling with the question, “What comes next?” — accompanied by a slight sense of panic, but also curiosity and motivation.

Going to the retreat I expected that it would be heavily focused on work — structured, practical, and professional. To my surprise, the experience took a different turn. I liked that we were discouraged from being on our phones which gave me an opportunity to detox off social media. I run a grassroots organisation and I always imagined that being away from my phone would result in things collapsing but that was not the case. This was a good sign because it means the organisation can survive without me being there. The Institute of Healing of Memories created a space that was not only reflective but profoundly safe. It reminded me that healing and growth often begin in moments of honest vulnerability.

The hybrid sessions of my psychosocial support led by Shaheeda were instrumental in grounding me during this time. Originally when I met her, I was skeptical. Based on South Africa’s history of apartheid I thought sessions with her would not be fruitful but that was not the case. My experience with her and the different kinds of therapy were invaluable to have. These engagements reminded me of the importance of self-care in advocacy work — how one cannot pour from an empty cup. The space encouraged openness, connection, and reflection.

On a professional front, the fellowship allowed me to refine my approach to research and project development. Meeting with Equal Education gave me a fresh perspective on how to approach my work. Their model of advocacy showed me how I can continue to educate critically thinking amongst the youth. I thought about how to continue the work of **Youth Rising**, but with a more strategic focus. This led to the conceptualisation of the **Tuwajibike Campaign (which means being responsible)**, aimed at transforming Gen Z's protest energy into meaningful civic engagement; particularly through voter registration. Embedding research into this initiative helped identify and close gaps from earlier stages of the work, while shaping a clearer long-term goal which is fostering meaningful civic education.

I have been running the organisation for three years and its purpose has changed over the years. This year funding has been at the forefront which resulted in civic engagement being slower than in the earlier years. Going back home to my organisation, I am rethinking what our objectives, aims and mission are. What exactly do we want to achieve and how will we do it? I am still trying to figure out my organisation's niche but it will follow.

In terms of friendships, it has been an honour meeting all the other fellows. It has been amazing spending time with each other whether it was doing school work or going out together. I hope we will maintain our friendship long after we have left the fellowship.

The fellowship provided me with an opportunity to sit in spaces that otherwise on a normal day I would have never experienced. Coming to South Africa was my first time leaving my country. If you told me in the beginning of the year that I would be at UWC being taught by a lecturer who has taught at Harvard University and the Law faculty I would have not believed you.

In the same breath, I am awake to the realities and sufferings of South Africa and especially touched by the Reclaim the City occupation movement of the housing crisis. When I came to Cape Town, I imagined the beaches, the food and all the beautiful things. I had never read about the housing crisis currently happening. South Africa is a way better economy than Kenya yet they still face such challenges. It would be preposterous of me to think that as Kenyans we will figure out everything and everyone will be happy. It will take time but being exposed to the possibility is what gives me hope.

What impressed me about the culture at UWC is that people are not tied to their titles unlike in my country. In undergrad I got into some trouble for failing to address one of my lecturers by their title which is something I still struggle with. So, to be able to call people by names and not titles in an academic institution is humbling. But when I become a Dr, everyone will have to use the title.

In terms of personal growth, one of the most valuable lessons I learned during this fellowship was the power of asking. Asking for guidance, collaboration, or opportunities. Whether the answer is yes or no, each ask opened a door or taught me something new. Networking became not just about professional gain, but about building relationships rooted in mutual respect and shared purpose.

Equally important was learning to recognise the signs of burnout and developing strategies to rest intentionally. Gratitude became my anchor. Gratitude for the fellows I met, the mentors who guided me, and the community that held space for my growth. Each interaction with the PUG and UWC community, particularly with Dr Mmeli, Nheo and Sindisa, reminded me of how collective support strengthens individual purpose.

This fellowship has been more than an academic or professional chapter, it has been a personal awakening. I leave with a deeper understanding of balance between work and rest, between giving and receiving, between leading and learning.

To everyone who walked this path with me, colleagues, mentors, and the AUH team; thank you for shaping this journey. The lessons I have gathered here will continue to inform my work and my sense of purpose long after the fellowship ends.

About Hawah Maria Koena

Hawah Maria Koena from Kenya is a young human rights defender and chief visionary officer with a focus oscillating between reproductive health rights for Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) and Political consciences. Her work primarily centres on ensuring access to fundamental health services, particularly safe and informed access to contraceptives and reproductive health care while also engaging community members on constitutionalism to inform their agency to engage meaningfully in the political arena. Hawah leads community engagement initiatives, coordinates workshops, and partners with local organisations to reduce stigma and improve youth-friendly services. These efforts aim to empower AGYW to exercise their rights and make informed health decisions about their health but also within the governance aspect.