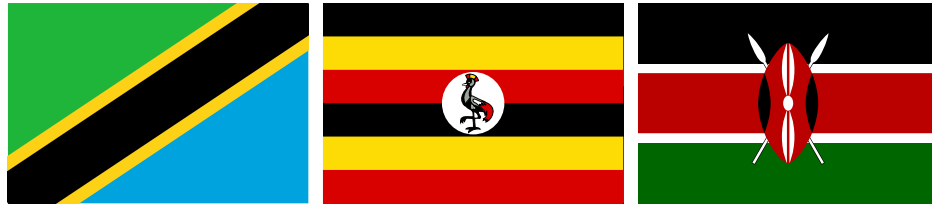# The Professional Fellows Program on Inclusive Civic Engagement

Fall 2025 Professional Fellow

Maria S. Makau

Co-Founder, Shield Maidens

Advocate-in-Training, Kenya School of Law

Kenya

Maria is the Co-Founder of Shield Maidens, an initiative dedicated to raising digital security awareness and promoting inclusive access to online spaces, particularly for persons with disabilities. She has served as a legal intern at the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD), where she contributed to legal research, policy analysis, and accessibility compliance initiatives.

Maria holds a Bachelor of Laws degree from Strathmore University, with a specialization in human rights and data protection laws. She is currently enrolled in the Advocates Training Program at the Kenya School of Law and has completed specialized training in disability rights and data protection policies and rights. She is also certified in cybersecurity.

Follow-on Project

Empowering Women with Disabilities in Kenya through Digital Safety, Cybersecurity Awareness, and Civic Engagement

Issue: Persons with disabilities (PwDs) face multiple barriers that prevent them from safely accessing digital platforms, limiting their ability to engage in civic activities and assume leadership roles, particularly in civic and political spheres (WHO, 2021). Many online spaces are not designed with accessibility in mind, making it difficult for PwDs to navigate websites, engage in digital activism, or participate in civic discussions (WHO, 2021). Studies indicate 75% of PwDs in Kenya lack awareness of cybersecurity risks (KNBS, 2022; KICTANet, 2019). The lack of cybersecurity awareness presents significant challenges to leadership, as PwDs—especially women with disabilities (WwDs)—may avoid engaging in online civic or political spaces due to fears of cyber threats (WFD, 2020).

Women with disabilities (WwDs) are particularly vulnerable, as online harassment and cyberbullying disproportionately target them, discouraging participation in civic and political spaces (UN Women, n.d.). Misinformation, cyber fraud, and the lack of effective digital policies further harm WwDs, limiting their ability to advocate for their rights (CIPE, 2024). Without urgent action to improve accessibility, digital safety, and awareness, WwDs will continue to be excluded from leadership roles.

Project Objective: Maria's project aims to enhance digital safety and cybersecurity awareness among Kenyan PwDs, particularly WwDs, by equipping them with skills to navigate online spaces safely. Additionally, it seeks to foster active participation in civic and political life and create safe digital spaces where PwDs can engage with policymakers and activists.

Project Description: Maria will train 10 Kenyan PwDs, aged 18–35, on cybersecurity, digital rights, and civic engagement. Eligible participants must have a demonstrated interest in leadership, civic engagement, or digital activism. Participants will be recruited via a Google Form shared in an existing WhatsApp group focused on civic engagement. Recruitment will prioritize those in Nairobi for in-person meetings, and others across Kenya for virtual participation. Over six months, participants will engage in four hybrid training sessions that cover topics such as cybersecurity basics, recognizing and avoiding cyber threats, safe political and civic engagement online, and digital rights advocacy.

The training will follow a universal design approach to ensure accessibility and will be delivered as three virtual sessions and one in-person workshop. Through these sessions, participants will learn how to protect themselves online and take part in discussions about their rights. Maria will conduct the training in partnership with Shield Maidens (the organization that Maria co-founded), UN Women, and the Oslo Center (an independent non-profit, based in Norway, working on democratization and democratic governance).

To develop effective and relevant training content, Maria will repurpose and refine existing materials. She will collaborate with experts in cybersecurity, digital rights, and civic engagement to enhance the training and seek additional partnerships to provide technical expertise, facilitate sessions, and offer mentorship.

Follow-up strategies include maintaining a WhatsApp mentorship group, conducting monthly check-ins, and fostering peer learning through community engagement. To measure impact, Maria will carry out pre-post assessments and surveys and develop an alumni network to sustain long-term engagement.

For sustainability, Maria will create a dedicated page on a Shield Maidens website (currently in development) to host training materials, share best practices, highlight impact stories, and offer interactive features like forums, comment sections, or live sessions.

By integrating this project into ongoing digital opportunity initiatives that Maria leads or supports, the project will help create lasting change, ensuring that Kenyans with disabilities are not only present in digital spaces but also safe, empowered, and actively engaged in civic life.

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