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Michelle Twali: Finding Solutions For Displaced Communities Through Research

In celebration of World Refugee Day on June 20, 2024, IPA's Displaced Livelihood Initiative highlights the stories of refugees who are using research to respond to the unique challenges and opportunities that displaced populations face.



Michelle Twali was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Innovations for Poverty Action. She is now an Assistant Professor at NYU. (Photo Courtesy of Michelle Twali)

Michelle Twali, an Assistant Professor at New York University, focuses her research on intergroup conflict, the persistence of violence, and the recovery process for displaced individuals. Being a refugee herself, her experience has shaped her career in psychology and her dedication to understanding and improving refugee lives worldwide.

“These experiences gave me a firsthand understanding of how complex the lives of displaced people can be—there is immense strength, resilience, and solidarity among displaced people. However, this should not detract from the structural challenges they also face. My goal has always been to examine these complexities.”

Twali’s family was visiting relatives when the Rwandan Genocide began. Unable to return home, they sought asylum in Kenya. She saw firsthand how inadequate policies and programs can impact displaced populations. “My sister suffered from a chronic illness and due to poor healthcare. She experienced a very preventable death. My sister was an all-around incredible person. My family and the world experienced an extreme loss,” Twali said.

Twali's story reflects a larger global issue, with over 117 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, nearly 66% living in poverty. As these numbers rise, so does the protraction. At present, displacement lasts on average 10 years for internally displaced populations and 20 years for those displaced outside of their country of origin.

To effectively address the unique challenges faced by displaced populations Twali emphasizes that rigorous evaluations of programs and policies are essential to ensuring that they’re actually having a net-positive impact. She believes that researchers have a responsibility to ensure that their work positively impacts displaced communities without causing harm.

Through her efforts, Twali is not only honoring her family's journey but also inspiring a new generation of researchers committed to making the world a more compassionate place for people experiencing displacement.