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The Life of a Refugee | Can Yoga Really Make a Difference?

Words: Rola Tassabehji



Among the many grim statistics of the 2022 Year in Reviews, one stands out. According to the UNDP, 100 million have been displaced, “a record that should never have been set”. Yet, despite the growing tragic trend, more community services and programs are being launched to help people displaced by war, violence and human rights — with various yoga programs being introduced in refugee camps across Europe and Middle East.

VOICES FROM THE FRONT LINES

Voices of marginalized people, the ones who have experienced discrimination and exclusion, are rare in the yoga world. As an Afghan Iranian refugee who discovered yoga and became a yoga teacher while living in refugee camps in Greece, the story of Fatemeh Jafari is one of those rare stories of hope and inspiration for others.

In 2019, at age 24, Fatemeh escaped through rugged mountainous terrain to Turkey, followed by a traumatic boat trip to the Greek island of Lesbos, where she settled in the notorious refugee camp of Moria (before it was destroyed by fire on September 8, 2020). Originally intended to hold 3,000 people, 19,000 lived at Moria, at the time the largest refugee camp in Europe, with conditions often described as “hell”. But Fatemeh soon discovered a gym closeby, with regular yoga classes. It was open for anyone, including refugees and social workers, and run by Yoga and Sports with Refugees, a charity that seeks to create healthy safe places of belonging through sports and yoga.

“I used to do gymnastics back in Iran, so I went to work out and then began practicing yoga three time a week. The environment in those yoga classes was so different. There were social workers from NGOs joining, and the boys were also nice. While going back to the camp was hard, yoga classes kept me alive. I don’t think I would have survived living in Moria otherwise.”

With the help of an organisation called Omid Foundation, Fatemeh was able to complete her teacher training, despite moving between Athens and Lesbos camps and facing Covid restrictions. As soon as she completed her training, Fatemeh started teaching online to girls in Iran and Afghanistan and, post-Covid lockdowns, at the Sports and Yoga in Athens. “It was a miracle to find yoga teacher training in the camp and since then everything came together to help me go forward,” says Fatemeh.

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white tank top and dark leggings, is performing a yoga pose on a beach at sunset. She is in a variation of the Bhujangasana (Cobra) pose, with her right knee bent and her right hand reaching up to hold her right foot. Her left hand is on the ground, and her left leg is extended back. Her head is tilted back, and her arms are raised. The background shows the ocean waves and a bright, golden sunset sky.

“Teaching became my way towards self-healing. I believe our body has memory of our traumas, so yoga helped me reconnect with my body. Through sharing these feelings, I healed myself. I wanted to inspire other girls to try yoga in addition to the different popular sports they are used to, like break dance or self-defence.”



PHOTO: MANDALA PROJECT

After two years in Athens, Fatemeh managed, through a year-long interview and paperwork process, to travel to Canada last September. She plans to start teaching yoga to other similar organisations. “My values remain the same. I want to share these feelings I have with yoga. Yoga helped me survive and I want to help others survive.”

While she enjoys practicing and teaching different styles of yoga, including Vinyasa and Yin, Fatemeh finds just sitting in a group with other yogis powerful. “To see people around you sitting together, and with their feelings, is really encouraging. There aren’t so many places that allow people to say it’s fine, it’s OK, to feel bad.”

She adds, “Teaching was a bit difficult because of my own past experiences and mistreatments by men. But then I began to see beyond the separation. Men are also victims of lots of things. They are human too. The feelings we give each other in a yoga class, we can take to all parts of our lives. These include feelings of contentment with yourself, regardless of what you achieved.”

CARING THROUGH YOGA

For American-born Molly Nixon, the volunteering journey began in 2014, when she lost one of her closest friends in Middle East violence. She moved to Greece in 2016 as an independent volunteer at the peak of the refugee crisis, initially helping people off boats to get warm and find shelter. Her crisis relief efforts led her to work on the borders with other camps in Greece, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey. “I was trained in yoga, so I began introducing yoga practices to Syrian women, Yezidi teenagers, as well as classes for men. The yoga program became my passion.”

Molly sought out more projects and training around yoga for refugees and headed to Amman, Jordan for trauma-informed yoga training with the Yoga Mandala Project (YMP).

“YMP was created in 2014 when our founders were volunteering as yoga teachers and yoga therapists in Amman. They received wishes from the refugee participants for continued programming and saw a need for consistency in care. That is where the trauma-informed trainings were born. We now offer these trainings for humanitarians from all over the world annually to help fund our healing-centred programming with both refugees and those serving them.”

However, she adds that there is a hierarchy of needs. “In Greece, conditions were so horrible at that time that yoga wasn’t an option for many. But as things progressed from tents to more stable accommodation, trauma-sensitive yoga attracted different demographics, including men and women from 3 to 75 years, and can be very powerful.”

In late 2019, Molly returned to the US and began directing the Yoga Mandala Project and till now continues to support the organisation remotely. “By transferring most of our support online, we were able to secure more volunteers from different languages and countries, creating partnerships not only for refugees but also for humanitarians, like myself, who need

self-care to avoid burn-out.” She adds, “In addition to yoga movement and philosophy teachers, we have different resources including tapping (EFT) facilitators and dance teachers. There is more awareness and recognition of the role of yoga, and somatic practices in general, as we begin to understand that trauma lives in the body.”

Reflecting on learnings from her seven years leading yoga programs for refugees, Molly mentions the importance of offering a sense of safety in the class while including practices that support sleep and pain management, as well as tools to empower and provide relief from what participants have mentioned as “bad thoughts from before.”

“Our trauma-informed facilitation training for humanitarians and refugee community members helps to sustain our healing-centred programming, which continues to evolve based on feedback.

Our programs focus on empowerment, uncovering a sense of agency and trauma recovery. as well as creating an ethical foundation of yoga and service, including principles such as Ahimsa, non-violence, and inclusion,” adds Molly.

Today, the Yoga Mandala Project, one of the earliest to offer yoga to refugees since 2014, has expanded its support beyond the Middle East and Europe, with its biggest program in Hong Kong. “Whether in refugee camps in Greece, or urban community centres in Europe and Asia, our work remains more relevant than ever. Yoga is about social justice and refugee welfare,” says Molly.



Photo Credit: Fatemeh

THE SCIENCE BEHIND TRAUMA-SENSITIVE YOGA

Renowned addiction expert, speaker and author Dr. Gabor Maté explains that “trauma is not what happens to a person, but what happens within them.” In line with its Greek origins, he equates the word with an unhealed wound and confirms that nothing overtly dramatic needs to happen to induce trauma.

Another leading trauma researcher and author, Bessel A. van der Kolk, describes trauma as a “disease of not being able to be present.” He explains that emotional pain and traumatic memories can be “stored” in the body long after exposure to a traumatic situation has ended, as “the body keeps the score”.

Meanwhile, research has confirmed that yoga helps war veterans with post traumatic stress disorder, in addition to other victims of other traumatic experiences not related to war and violence, including in reducing the stress of university students, and depression, anxiety, and alcoholism. In one of the best resources related to trauma-sensitive yoga, *Overcoming Trauma through Yoga*, the authors explain how yoga offer

a platform for body-based intervention with trauma survivors. helping build internal strength in an “embodied manner.” Key themes of trauma-sensitive yoga include helping people become “somatically present,” for example, through breath awareness. Providing opportunities to make choices and help regain a sense of control is another theme. Yoga in this context provides a “structured, supportive and self-paced medium for survivors to make choices in relation to their bodies and their experiences that are kind, gentle, and caring — all of the things that were missing during the trauma.”

So, in the end, can a yoga class really make a difference to refugees? While it continues to provide a lifeline for Fatemeh, a powerful approach for healing in various refugee settings used by humanitarians like Molly, its full potential remains untapped. Meanwhile, science confirms that through trauma sensitive yoga, people can find ways to be in their bodies in a gentler and more nurturing way. It is by no means a silver bullet towards healing, but a powerful and accessible tool in the process.

Moreover, if one widens the definition of trauma to include different forms of unhealed wounds, while adopting an understanding of yoga closer to its original meaning of union between mind, body and spirit, perhaps we are all refugees that can benefit from using yoga to experience moments of peace and coming back home.

