

Emily, Ourmala and hope



Eleanor Pontin (*MO 1996-2001*) sees for herself how Emily Brett (*LI 1994-96*) is giving hope to some of the world's most abused and traumatised women

In the relative oasis of London's Hackney City Farm you will find the charity Ourmala, founded by Emily Brett to serve some of today's most vulnerable, marginalised and isolated members of society. Emily has an MA in Creative Writing and originally wanted to be a novelist, but changed direction when she asked herself, "We only get to live once; what do I really want to do with my time?"



The charity works with refugee and asylum-seeking women referred by larger organisations. "The core of women we work with are registered with the UK Home Office. They are either staying in the UK temporarily before it is safe to return to their homeland or, in exceptional cases, have been granted indefinite leave to remain for humanitarian reasons. Atrocities, such as torture and violent political regimes are common experiences and many have lost children and loved ones to war. They are referred to us by organisations such as the British Red Cross and Freedom from Torture."

Female refugees are more affected by violence against women than any other women's population in the world and all are at risk of rape or other forms of sexual aggression. In fact due to its scale, prevalence and profound impact, the UN regards sexual violence as one of its greatest global protection challenges. Nearly half a million women were raped during the Rwandan genocide; more than 90% of women and girls over the age of three suffered sexual violence in parts of Liberia, while three out of four women have survived it in parts of Eastern Congo. It is these women to whom Ourmala is dedicated.

Emily's primary and highly effective tactic to help the women combat their pain and move on with their lives is yoga. Ourmala offers free therapeutic yoga classes that enable women from similar backgrounds to congregate, achieve some sense of stability and – for want of a better phrase – regain their senses. It also provides meals, English lessons and help with accessing additional services and education. Those helped leave visitors in no doubt how vital this support is to them:

"I have no one. Pain, it goes after yoga. I sleep, feel hope. Thank you so much." H.

"My English comes again after yoga. Before I am so anxious, so much pain, I cannot speak." K.

"I feel positive and hope, keep practising yoga every day. I will have a good night's sleep, less panic attacks." S.

"Yoga is like a battery recharge." D.

Emily says the women also gain a much-needed sense of belonging.

The calm, assertive tone of the yoga teacher, who uses hand gestures to communicate, clearly eases the language barrier; the women need only enough English to describe if they are in pain or discomfort.



The atmosphere is entirely one of focus and attention. Nobody is judged, labelled or stigmatised, everyone is welcome and all are safe. But why yoga?

There is a surprisingly significant body of scientific evidence demonstrating the positive effects of yoga on physical and mental health – from the neuroscientific to the relief of lower back pain and post-traumatic stress disorder. Alongside instant positive effects there are also long-term health benefits: “Yoga is very good for some psychological conditions. The practice of concentrating on the breath and...the body helps to calm the mind as it helps to switch the focus away from the constant chatter and worries of the mind.”
Dr Kate Sparks, British Psychological Society

“Yoga targets unmanaged stress, a main component of chronic disorders such as anxiety...by reducing the stress response. The practice enhances resilience and improves mind-body awareness, which can help people adjust their behaviours based on the feelings they’re experiencing in their bodies.” *Khalsa, Indian Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology*

Most Ourmala women have suffered significant amounts of trauma, but Emily observes that many are not clinically diagnosed thanks to their extraordinary resilience. Yoga helps restore their self-esteem, build confidence and boost that inner strength, helping them to move forward.

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Asylum is a controversial topic in modern society and one that is commonly misinterpreted. In late 2013 refugees, pending asylum cases and stateless persons made up just 0.23% of the total UK population. The female element is of course smaller still, but the women have many and various needs and benefit from Ourmala’s particular brand of compassion in increasing numbers. Indeed, their weekly respite in Hackney is for many the only constant in their lives, the one part of their week they can rely on and where they find kindness and a level of synchronisation. Yet finding funding for this admirable charity is, inevitably, a constant challenge.

The majority of asylum seekers do not have the right to work in the UK whilst their cases are being processed. This can take years, during which they necessarily must rely on state support. Housing may be provided but it can be anywhere, and is more often than not ‘hard to let’ undesirable property spurned by local

council tenants. It is therefore common for the women to feel constantly frightened in homes where they survive on £36.62 per person, per week – that’s £5.23 a day for food, sanitation and clothing (source: the Home Office). Regardless of competency, the women may not earn a single penny until they have been granted indefinite leave to remain. One woman at Ourmala waited 16 years for hers; in Rwanda her career had earned her a good salary. Imagine the nosedive in her employability, self-belief and confidence after that.

Halfway through the yoga session I attended, a couple of the women slipped out. I naively believed this was because of work commitments, but one was attending her umpteenth meeting at the Home Office to complete yet more paperwork in a second language, with no translator to help clarify complex terms, while the other was going to the Red Cross on the only day of the week it is possible to pick up the food parcel on which she relies.

At the end of the session an Ourmala team member gently explained to one woman why she is no longer eligible for the £4.40 weekly travel expense payment she’s received in the past. In many cases, without this reimbursement, the women would be unable to attend. Sadly, in order to maintain an overall service for all, Ourmala recently decided it could only continue to pay the transport costs of those who do not yet have leave to remain

permanently in the UK. However the women now excluded from this benefit still ask for it every week; £4 for them represents a small fortune.

Who becomes an asylum seeker?

The spectrum is huge; in Emily's experience anyone from corporate high-flier, nurse or doctor to the educationally deprived. For all something happens – a dictatorship, for example – and they escape with only their lives. The husband of one Ourmala attendee was a university professor in Bolivia; her son still manages to achieve straight A grades here in the UK. Despite being housed in a tower block favoured by gangs and drug dealers he is taking Physics, Chemistry, Maths and Further Maths A-levels.

If you had been born somewhere different, this could have happened to you.

The demand on Ourmala's resources is huge. Emily knows there are some 14 organisations in London alone who would like Ourmala to provide yoga sessions, whilst there are extensive waiting lists for the existing classes. When I ask

about the future, I am thrilled to discover that they have just achieved charitable status as a charitable incorporated organisation. This will allow them to work as an established charity and apply for funding as such, but also work as a social enterprise to secure additional funding. This is no guarantee for the future, but is certainly a step forward.

The ultimate dream is to extend the programme to include men and children in the UK with similar needs. Emily has founded a hugely successful formula in Ourmala; her dream, once the UK demand has been met, is for the women



they have helped to train as yoga teachers themselves to aid others and provide both international and multi-ethnic teams that could work together, especially in refugee camps.

"We want to help you, tell us how we make more classes. Yoga is best part of my week. More classes good so more women come." A.

Every woman that has stepped through Ourmala's doors has suffered horrendously and been blighted by sexual violence, persecution and atrocities inconceivable to most of us. Ourmala helps them face their daily challenges and believe in a future. The work that Emily and her volunteers face seems insurmountable, but I have a feeling that, with their determination and courage, this is only the beginning. I was privileged to meet her and the women she serves and cannot wait to see what Ourmala achieves next.

www.ourmala.com

Eleanor Pontin read Theology and English Literature at Cardiff and is now working as part of Apple's Leadership Team in the UK.

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