

Researchers explore yoga healing a shattered country

March 30 2018, by Aniruddho Chokroborty-Hoque



Mayme Audra Lefurgey, a graduate student in Western's collaborative program between Women's Studies and Feminist Research and the Centre for Transitional Justice and Post-Conflict Reconstruction, recently spent three months in Colombia, interviewing a Colombian non-profit organization on how it is using yoga to help victims of the country's civil war. Credit: Paul Mayne/Western News

Dunna, a Colombian non-profit organization, is healing its country – one yoga class at a time.

For the past 10 years, the organization has taught yoga to victims of the Colombian Conflict – a 60-year civil war that ended only two years ago – to help them cope with traumatic experiences, regain trust in one another and, in the process, rebuild Colombia.

It's working. Recently, the Colombian government officially became one of its biggest sponsors.

Mayme Audra Lefurgey, a graduate student in Western's collaborative program between Women's Studies and Feminist Research and the Centre for Transitional Justice and Post-Conflict Reconstruction, recently spent three months in Colombia, interviewing Dunna's staff and participants, as well as other non-governmental organizations for her doctoral research.

She hopes to document the group's groundbreaking work and identify reasons for its success.

Her thesis will be a critical reference for governments exploring alternative ways to help vulnerable populations deal with grief, trauma and pain. She sees opportunities for her work to benefit, for example, Indigenous Peoples and incarcerated populations in Canada, Syrian refugees in Canada, Germany and Turkey, and victims of rape and sexual violence in Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

"Psychological help, even when offered, is often limited," Lefurgey said. "The conflicts and traumas faced by victims are very complex and expressing it verbally isn't always the most effective way."

As Lefurgey found out in her interviews, victims of the Colombian

Conflict sometimes cope with pain and trauma by stretching, breathing and letting go.

The Colombian Conflict began in the 1960s with a brutal power struggle between the Colombian government and paramilitary groups.

Approximately 220,000 people, including 45,000 children, were killed.

Two years ago, the government and Colombia's largest insurgent group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, FARC), signed a peace accord and officially ended the conflict.

Governments, non-governmental organizations and volunteer groups continue to launch mental-health initiatives and counselling services throughout the conflicting regions until the present day.

These are meant to provide emotional and mental support to generations of Colombians scarred by six decades of violence, drug trafficking, rape, kidnappings and extortion.

For some of these victims, talking about their experience with doctors is crippling.

Yoga gives them an alternative way to revisit their pain, without having to directly confront it.

Dunna's instructors follow trauma-sensitive yoga protocols with their participants. For example, they allow participants to decide if they are ready for certain postures, like lying and relaxing on the ground, closing their eyes, or particular breathing exercises, all of which can potentially trigger traumatic flashbacks. They also use circular layouts for yoga mats to prevent abused persons from feeling observed by someone practicing behind them.

Unlike typical yoga classes that are usually 45 minutes to one hour and primarily focus on poses, Dunna's classes last for 90 minutes – only 30 minutes of which focus on poses. The rest consist of deep relaxation, guided meditation and specialized breathing techniques.

"These victims have experienced intense trauma and many are always on edge," Lefurgey said. "Before Dunna, they didn't know what it was to be relaxed and the experience of yoga has been revolutionary for them in their healing processes."

The group faced resistance from the government when it first introduced yoga as an alternative option to help the conflict's traumatized [victims](#) in 2010.

"Dunna had to justify its request for funding a solution whose benefits were not scientifically proven," Lefurgey says.

Since, Dunna has partnered with psychologists and neuroscientists to validate the effects of yoga. For example, in one recent research paper, psychologists showed yoga lowers the rates of PTSD in Dunna's participants. "They do the work, but continue to prove why it is so useful," she said.

For participants, who range from former FARC members, to young offenders, to parents who lost their children in the conflict, [yoga](#) helps them decompress, feel safe and trust each other again.

"These participants realize they can have differences and still learn to co-exist with their partners at home, their children and their community," Lefurgey said. "Eventually, this translates to how the country processes conflict and political situations in a broader sense."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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