

BROWN GIRL SURF

By Danny Clayton / October 24, 2012 / Talking Story / 5 comments

Today`s Talking Story is a big one. We came across the Brown Girl Surf (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com>) website earlier this year and were instantly intrigued by their mission considering the years I, and many of my friends, have spent travelling to remote locations to surf. These kind of travels lend themselves to observing just how lucky we are to be able to do exactly that: travel to surf for leisure – something our local counterparts (both female and male) in places such as Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India, Maldives etc. don`t have the opportunity to do so.

*Founder, Farhana Huq (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com/my-story.html>), contacted me as she is about to embark on a trip to India and Bangladesh to meet some of these female surfers and document her experiences with friend and filmmaker, Cara Jones (<http://storytellersforgood.com/about-2/>), from Storytellers for Good (<http://storytellersforgood.com/>). They are currently fundraising for their project: **Surfing Possibility – Stories of India and Bangladesh`s First Surfer Girls** (<http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility>).*

*I am humbled to see the girls and women on the pages of **Brown Girl Surf** standing their ground, and often seen as `rebellious,` in their pursuit of enjoying something we often take for granted – finding freedom in our chosen sport.*

*I hope you enjoy **Farhana`s** story...*



*Photographs credited as follows: the Gaza Strip girls photograph is from **Alessandro Gandolf**; The girl on a pink shortboard is South Africa's first sponsored female surfer of Indian descent, from **Vinoo Nydoo***

What is your story and what is the inspiration behind Brown Girl Surf? Though I grew up 5 minutes from the ocean, girls just didn't surf. There were no places to really learn unless you happened to be born into a surfing family. *Luckily, I was raised in a family that valued the ocean and valued supporting girls in pursuit of their passions.* One of my fondest childhood memories was fishing on my dad's boat and playing at the beach. I still remember the day I caught two flukes on my fishing line. I could barely reel

them out of the water but I'll never forget the feeling of wonder at seeing my catch and the waves of congratulations from all the fellow fishermen.



(<https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/toro-toro-2010-2.jpg>) My girlhood shaped everything of who I am today, including my exposure to sports at a young age. At 15, I became the first South Asian girl member of the U.S. National Karate Team. It was an amazing experience. But I was aware early on that life looked vastly different for most girls around the world, like when I used to visit Bangladesh, my dad's birth country. There I saw a girl who couldn't be more than 13, with a baby, forced to beg on the street to make a living. It really left an impression on me and I was well aware of my privilege for being born in the family I was born into and for growing up with Western infrastructure and resources. I started volunteering in my teens at a transitional housing site for women and children in my community. I saw similar issues right here in our own backyard of girls having to grow up so quickly and having so many responsibilities at a young age.

I really felt a sense of responsibility as a global citizen to make sure I did something in my life to also address the status of women and girls in the world. So by the time I was 24, I had started a non-profit called *C.E.O. Women* to empower women just like my aunt. The organization was *dedicated to helping low-income immigrant and refugee women to become entrepreneurs*. I started the organization with just \$1,000 and grew it to national acclaim. To this day, I am so honored I had the privilege to work with over 2,000 women in the eleven years it ran.

The work of the organization was amazing and I found as the years went by, it took a lot out of me. I had a strong desire to reconnect with my health and my body and that's when I started really getting into surfing. In the 10th year at *C.E.O. Women*, we had grown to almost a million dollars in budget size, and I was exhausted. Though the organization was doing a lot of good, I found myself chronically tired, sick and stressed. *In 2010, I took a much needed sabbatical and took 5 months off to travel the world on a surf adventure.*

I came back rejuvenated and with newfound optimism. But 3 months later I started to get pains in my body. When I went to the doctors, they found a few cysts growing in me. I was a little scared, especially since I had lost many friends already, of my age, to cancer. My very first instinct when I got the news was *'I have to surf and live in the moment now!'* I also felt inside me I had a message to deliver to the

world, and it felt like the right time had come to explore what was next in my journey. I gave my board a year advance notice and decided to embark on my next calling. Thankfully the cysts were benign but still, it was definitely a bit of a wake up call for me.

After 11 years running my organization, I was like, what would I do now? Who would I be? I went through several ideas and came up with one I thought was brilliant! I'd be a professional big wave surfer just like **Laird Hamilton**! I'd tie a rock to my foot and sprint at the bottom of the ocean, run the sand dunes of Ocean Beach, get sponsors, and be on my merry way. You can only imagine the reaction I got from my parents at hearing this.

I started training with a coach down in Santa Cruz and even got a few sponsors this year. I ended up injuring myself and started to realize that this wasn't my path. Last Fall, my coach sent me something fascinating. It was an article that made mention of India's first female surfer (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com/south-asia.html>). Surf? India? I was so curious and fascinated at the same time. *Who is she? How did she do it? How did she get her family's acceptance? Does she compete? Is she encouraging other women and girls to partake?* I then started to notice that women and girls in the most unlikely places were starting to surf or be the first to pursue an ocean loving sport – in Bangladesh, in China and even amongst the war zone of the Gaza strip. I was intrigued.



(<https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/sunset-at-ocean-beach-random-photoshoot-farhana2.jpg>)

I was ever curious about the stories of these girls and how they were managing to break so many barriers to pursue this sport. My desire to want to meet and connect with them led me to start **Brown Girl Surf** (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com/>), named so in honor of Polynesia's first female surfers.

Brown Girl Surf is a journey to share the stories and projects of trailblazing female surfers around the world. It is also a platform for me to speak up about larger environmental issues like plastics pollution and issues like self-image and identity.

*The goal of **Brown Girl Surf** is to elevate the significance of these women and girls, to connect and support them through a global network and to use their stories to inspire and empower a culture of trailblazing females to live in possibility of their dreams.*

You`ve been a busy woman throughout your life – from National Karate champ to socialentrepreneur to non-profit-empire-builder. How did you come across surfing and what impact has it had on your life? Growing up 5 minutes from the beach, I had always wanted to surf, but girls just didn't really do that. Nobody in my family had ever tried. It wasn't until my early 20's when I moved to California that I seriously considered trying it. I took a surf lesson on a trip to Hawaii and well, I sucked. I mean, really sucked. I tried a few more times over the years to learn but was just so frustrated. Some time passed and I was getting pretty burn't out from running my non-profit. *I really had a desire to connect with my body, spirit and mind in a healthy way and just kept coming back to surfing.* I think it was the fact that it was so challenging that kept drawing me to it. So one year I decided to go to Costa Rica for 3 weeks to learn to surf in warmer waters. I was just determined to do this. I was still horrible at surfing and afraid of the ocean. But when I came home, I couldn't live without it. I soon started braving the cold Northern Californian waters and was catching waves on my own. I started traveling around the world in search of waves. Each time I was out in the ocean, it was such a powerful and liberating experience for me.

In 2010, after running my non-profit for 10 years, I took a sabbatical and traveled around the world to surf. I went to places like Bali and Fiji and had the opportunity to surf all different kinds of waves. Traveling and meeting people as a surfer greatly empowered me. I found myself in situations and on waves that caused me a great deal of fear but being in that fear just pushed me to overcome it at each step of the way. It gave me a level of respect for the power of the ocean, and ***the spiritual importance of connecting to a sport like surfing.*** I feel like it brought me closer to the things that really matter in life as well like my relationships to other people, and to the environment. *I also observed how simply most people lived around the world, and really understood what made me happy.* I felt such a strong connection to the ocean that when I got back, I knew my next step in life had to do with surfing and the ocean. If it weren't for my experiences traveling and surfing in different countries and cultures, and my years of experience working on women's empowerment issues, **Brown Girl Surf** (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com>) would have never come to be.





(<https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/bangladeshi-surfer-girls.jpg>)

*Bangladeshi female surfers courtesy of the **Bangladesh Surf Club***

Through your research into these remarkable female surfers you've come across, who stands out to you and why? The story of one of Bangladesh's surfer girls, *Nassima* (<http://www.theinertia.com/surf/the-most-fearless-surfer/>), really stands out to me. My dad is from Bangladesh so I've traveled there many times from when I was little, and to now think Bangladesh has a generation of girl surfers is just amazing to me – this is something I couldn't even figure out how to do here growing up in America 5 minutes from the beach when I was her age. To top it off, *Nassima* is a girl who was essentially orphaned at a young age, who was picked up by the Bangladeshi surf club and taught to surf. She has gone through so much in her life from experiencing poverty and violence to literally then becoming the best female surfer in the country of Bangladesh. She is so brave and throughout all her challenges, she still manages to keep surfing. To me she is very inspirational and is an important role model for Bangladesh and for people in the rest of the world. It is people like *Nassima* who can really bring about change and give opportunities to other women and girls in her country simply by being a trailblazer. Her fierce determination and spirit is one I admire greatly.

Who is the Team behind BGS (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com/>)? I collaborate with academics, ocean scientists, neuroscience practitioners, film makers and surf buddies! They are all a part of what I like to call the *Brown Girl Surf* ecosystem. My best surfing buddy, Jackie Fornaro (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com/our-team.html>), helped me launch *Brown Girl Surf* earlier this year and contributed to honing much of the concept early on, and helping out immensely with a lot of our technical stuff. I would bounce off ideas with her weekly. Dr. Krista Comer (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com/our-team.html>), author of *Surfer Girls in the New World Order* (<http://www.amazon.com/Surfer-Girls-New-World-Order/dp/0822348055>) is also part of our ecosystem. If you haven't read that book, it's a must. *Krista* and I worked over the summer to develop the mission statement of *Brown Girl Surf*, and to think of ways of how we could *be a platform to connect and empower surfer girls around the world*. We really wanted to take a global look at how surfing is evolving in various communities around the world, and how we can all be connected to one another in solidarity. She is a brilliant academic and brings in so many *critical political and social insights and context to help make Brown Girl Surf relevant in the expanding global subculture of surfing*.

Another key collaborator is my friend Cara (<http://storytellersforgood.com/about-2/>) and her organization, *Storytellers for Good* (<http://storytellersforgood.com/>). They are partnering with us to produce a series of short profile documentaries for our project *Surfing Possibility: India and Bangladesh's First Surfer Girls* (<http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility>). *Cara* actually approached me after hearing a speech I gave in San Francisco about *Brown Girl Surf* (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com>) and what it means to live in possibility.

I am also blessed to have some of the top level ocean scientists and neuroscience practitioners as part of the *Brown Girl Surf Family* including Dr. Wallace 'J.' Nichols (<http://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/nature/The-Touchy-Feely-But-Totally-Scientific-Methods-Of-Wallace-J-Nichols.html?page=all>) of *LIVEBLUE* (<http://liveblueinitiative.org/>). Producer Sarah Kornfeld and Dr. M A Greenstein (<http://www.greensteininstitute.com/site/>). We were originally brought together around some revolutionary work on how the ocean is impacting the brain through J.'s *BLUEMiND* initiative (<http://www.centerforoceansolutions.org/news-events/events/blue-mind-your-brain-ocean-bay-area-science-festival>). Surfing is an obvious connection to this study. They have become good

friends of [Brown Girl Surf \(http://www.browngirlsurf.com\)](http://www.browngirlsurf.com) and support our work on many levels, especially as Brown Girl Surf takes on awareness raising ocean issues like plastic pollution and the like.

And of course, there are all of my friends and fellow surfers who have all contributed or become part of [Brown Girl Surf \(http://www.browngirlsurf.com/\)](http://www.browngirlsurf.com/) in some way, shape or form. We are working on building an online forum and hope one day to *connect surfer girls from Hawaii to the Gaza Strip* and have them sharing their opinions, thoughts and news on their lives as surfers. As you can see, [Brown Girl Surf \(http://www.browngirlsurf.com/\)](http://www.browngirlsurf.com/) is an ecosystem of ideas, informed by leading thinkers in many disciplines, and of course infused with a lot of my vision too. All of this is what gives [Brown Girl Surf \(http://www.browngirlsurf.com/\)](http://www.browngirlsurf.com/) its uniqueness.

Tell us some more about your current project, Surfing Possibility: [Surfing Possibility](http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility) (<http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility>) is a journey I am taking to Bangladesh and India (my parent's birth countries) to meet some of South Asia's first female surfers. My friend [Cara](http://storytellersforgood.com/about-2/) (<http://storytellersforgood.com/about-2/>) from [Storytellers for Good](http://storytellersforgood.com/) (<http://storytellersforgood.com/>) and I will produce short-form documentary profiles, blogs and photographs on these **brave** girls. Many of these girls have faced big societal barriers to even take on something like surfing including fighting gender and cultural expectations for girls and women in their society and even facing violence in some instances.

We deeply believe in the empowerment of women and girls. We believe that capturing these images and stories of female bravery and risk taking contributes to creating a culture to level the playing field for women and girls and *inspires people to go after their dreams.* We will also be producing a special [Surfing Possibility \(http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility\)](http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility) card deck featuring images of female surfers and surf imagery of South Asia. We're so tired of people saying to just accept the hand you are dealt in life. We want to inspire people to change the deck, so that is precisely what we're doing through this project. You can get a deck as part of the perks of our Indiegogo campaign too!

How can we help? Firstly, we are running an Indiegogo campaign to help us raise funds for travel, production, editing and distribution of the media produced as well as creation of the card deck. We'd love to have the surf community's support for this project.

GIVE: You can watch our [Indiegogo project video: \(http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility\)](http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility)

Sorry

This video does not exist.

Other ways to help:

Buy a Brown Girl Surf T-shirt (<http://374586.spreadshirt.com/>)! All proceeds support Surfing Possibility.

Follow our journey on Facebook (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com/facebook>)

Follow our blog (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com/blog.html>)

Tweet about us!



(<https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/farhana.jpg>)

Farhana in Fiji

What gets you leaping out of bed in the morning? Currently, my morning dawn patrols are getting me out of bed – really early! On non-surf days, [Surfing Possibility](http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility) (<http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility>) also gets me out of bed and excited to start the day! Also, working with emerging female entrepreneurs through my coaching business and hearing about their progression is really exciting!

Your favourite surf destination/spot: Fiji

Any words of wisdom for your fellow salt gypsies... When I started *C.E.O. Women*, my first non-profit, people (including my parents) said I shouldn't do it. They all said to just get a job. They couldn't see how it would work. That organization ended up operating for 11 years and changed so many women's lives. When I started [Brown Girl Surf](http://www.browngirlsurf.com/) (<http://www.browngirlsurf.com/>), some people said not to do it. My mom told me she didn't think anyone would wear a t-shirt with a name like *Brown Girl Surf*. It's already attracted over 1,500 followers on our Facebook page who are interested to connect and follow trailblazing female surfers around the world (and yes, people bought T-shirts to name in honor of Polynesia's first female surfers LOL).

When you are open to possibility, you can be anything you want to be. You can create anything you want to create. But in the process, you can't be anyone other than who you are. When you are in line with your natural creative, resourceful and whole self, you can start to affect change and do that which brings you the most joy in the world. Set aside your inner critics AND your external critics, and just go for it. You only live once, and as I always say, the ride is just way to fun to have it pass you by!

Top ten essential surf travel items:

1. An Ecostinger suit! This is like a dive suit only I wear it to surf. It's awesome! Never have to worry about bikinis falling off or getting sunburned! ****Author interjection – ok, Farhana – we seriously need to get you into some of our [surf leggings](http://saltgypsy.com/2012/08/01/bespoke-surf-leggings/) (<http://saltgypsy.com/2012/08/01/bespoke-surf-leggings/>)!!**
2. **Sunscreen** – [Alba Botanica](http://www.albabotanica.com/sun/natural-protection.html) (<http://www.albabotanica.com/sun/natural-protection.html>) or [Badger](http://www.badgerbalm.com/) (<http://www.badgerbalm.com/>) are some of my favorites because they are paraben free.
3. My **Mac** of course because I'm usually writing about my travels and sending newsletters home to friends and family
4. **REI super drying towel** (<http://www.rei.com/product/734727/rei-multitowel-lite-x-large>) – love them! They are light to pack and dry really quickly and I love to buy from them because they are a co-op!
5. **Reef booties** if you are surfing shallow reef breaks
6. **Chocolate** in case your surf high isn't enough of an aphrodesiac
7. **Sarong** – to wrap around your bathing suit when you're just hanging out. The best ones I've come across (in my opinion) are the Tahitian ones I bought at the outdoor market in Rarotonga.
8. **Hair tonic** – I make mine out of coconut oil, leave in conditioner and sunscreen – a **MUST** to spray on your hair before heading out to sea!
9. A pair of Terox **flip flops** because, um, they are THE most comfortable shoes ever in the entire world (and have a very good environmental recycling policy).
10. A [Brown Girl Surf T-shirt](http://374586.spreadshirt.com/) (<http://374586.spreadshirt.com/>), of course! 🙄

And if we came to visit you, where you take us for a post-surf feed or drink (note – we at salt gypsy LOVE good coffee and cocktails and a post-surf cold beer. mmmm) I'd take you to the original [Thai Noodle House](http://www.yelp.com/biz/king-of-thai-noodle-house-san-francisco-4) (<http://www.yelp.com/biz/king-of-thai-noodle-house-san-francisco-4>) on Clement Street in San Francisco, not too far from Ocean Beach! It has been one of my favorite San Fran bites since moving to California. As for cafés, I'd take you to [Trouble Coffee](http://www.yelp.com/biz/trouble-coffee-company-san-francisco) (<http://www.yelp.com/biz/trouble-coffee-company-san-francisco>) also by Ocean Beach, not only for their deliciously amazing cinnamon toast and coffee, but for the sheer fact that they also serve fresh, ice cold young coconuts...my favorite drink in the world! It's the BEST for an after surf feed.

Tags: [brown girl surf](https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/brown-girl-surf/) (<https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/brown-girl-surf/>), [farhana huq](https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/farhana-huq/) (<https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/farhana-huq/>), [female surfers south asia](https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/female-surfers-south-asia/) (<https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/female-surfers-south-asia/>), [india female surfer](https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/india-female-surfer/) (<https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/india-female-surfer/>), [storytellers for good](https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/storytellers-for-good/) (<https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/storytellers-for-good/>), [surfing possibility: indiegogo fundraising](https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/surfing-possibility-indiegogo-fundraising/) (<https://saltgypsy.wordpress.com/tag/surfing-possibility-indiegogo-fundraising/>)

5 comments

1. [Dionne Ybarra](#)

[October 25, 2012 at 3:45 pm](#)

[Reply](#)

Great Article. Go browngirl surf!!!! xoxo

◦ [Danny Clayton](#)

[October 26, 2012 at 8:09 am](#)

[Reply](#)

Thanks Dionne, Farhana was cool to talk with – so much good stuff going on in the world hey!

2. [gempar18](#)

[October 29, 2012 at 3:36 pm](#)

[Reply](#)

Reblogged this on [Gempar Agru Prakassa](#).

3. [The Wheats](#)

[November 5, 2012 at 3:27 am](#)

[Reply](#)

This is so inspiring. I can't thank you enough for sharing about this! Definitely going to spread the word about their project on my blog and want to donate to it myself.

◦ [Danny Clayton](#)

[November 5, 2012 at 2:29 pm](#)

[Reply](#)

Awesome, stoked you like it mate! Thanks for spreading the word,
Danny

Blog at WordPress.com.