

## IN FOCUS, PROFILES

# The Story of Brown Girl Surf

by **Farhana Huq**

November 10, 2012



**My name is Farhana. I am the daughter of immigrant parents from Pakistan and Bangladesh. I am the founder and chief trailblazer of a unique idea—Brown Girl Surf. This is my story.**

infocus\_surf

My family came to America nearly 40 years ago. My mother was the first woman in our family to graduate high school. She wore a traditional head covering while growing up and was arranged to marry someone at the age of 15. Her path was very much predetermined for her. She had little opportunity as a woman growing up in an eastern culture at that time.

After skirting an arranged marriage and immigrating to the United States, she found a way to re-invent herself. In doing so, she was one of the first women in our family to break the conventional barriers imposed on women. However, she still held on to her traditions and values as a woman raised in the East. She read her namaz each morning, she cooked very good curry, and she wouldn't let me wear short skirts ... forget about dating boys!

She and my father, whom she married of her own choosing, settled on the New Jersey Shore. Though I grew up five minutes from the ocean, there were no places to really learn surfing unless you happened to be born into a surfing family and besides girls really didn't surf. I was, however, raised in a family that 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.

My girlhood shaped who I am today. I was athletic and loved sports. At 15, I was the first South Asian girl member of the U.S. National Karate Team. It was an amazing experience.

But I was aware early on of the privileges I enjoyed and I realized that life looked vastly different for most girls around the world. In Bangladesh, the country where my dad was born, I saw a girl who couldn't be more than 13, with a baby, forced to beg on the streets to make a living. It really left an impression on me. I started volunteering in my teens at a transitional housing site for women and children. I witnessed how girls had to grow up quickly and shoulder responsibilities at a young age.

I went to college at Tufts and I also spent half a year studying in post-apartheid South Africa. I stumbled upon a Gender Studies class while I was there. We read about the status of women in the Bosnian War and learned about rape camps and ethnic genocide. It was a real turning point for me and I was somewhat naively in disbelief at this reality.

In my own family, I saw a favorite aunt of mine deal with domestic violence and go through a divorce. She had to raise her kids as a single mom on welfare, and that was a completely disempowering experience for her.

By the age of 22 I ended up moving to California to fulfill an Americorps project promoting women's economic empowerment. I felt a sense of responsibility as a global citizen to make sure I addressed the status of women and girls in the world.

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, with an awesome team, 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 I ran the organization. The work was amazing.

But, 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. I took my first trip to Hawaii and decided on a whim to take a surf lesson there. Nobody in my

family had ever done this. I had always wanted to learn. I sucked. I mean, really sucked. I tried a few more times over the years to learn but was frustrated. But, I was determined and decided to go to Costa Rica for three weeks to learn to surf. I was still horrible at surfing. I paddled out into the ocean, on my second day at Costa Rica, when a huge wave came and broke on me and dragged me halfway to shore.

My board hit me over the head and left me with a huge bump. I became terrified of the power of the ocean for those weeks but when I came home, I yearned for the feeling of being in the water. So I started braving the cold Northern Californian waters and was soon catching waves on my own. Before I knew it, I started traveling around the world in search of waves. Something felt so empowering about being able to maneuver through the ocean, catch a wave and ride it.



In my tenth year at C.E.O. Women, I took a much needed sabbatical to travel the world on a surf adventure.

I came back rejuvenated and with newfound optimism. But three months later I started to get pains in my body. When I went to the doctors, they found a few cysts. I was a little scared, especially since I had lost many friends 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 like I had a message to deliver to the

world, and it felt like the time had come to explore what was next in my career journey. Thankfully the cysts were benign. But the process forced me to evaluate my life. I tendered my resignation and began thinking of other opportunities and ideas.

I went through several ideas and settled on becoming 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. I ended up injuring myself and took it as a sign that this wasn’t my path. Last Fall, my coach sent me an article that made mention of India’s first female surfer. Surf and India? I was curious and fascinated at the same time. Who is this female surfer? 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 this ocean loving sport—in Bangladesh, China and even amongst the war zone of the Gaza strip. I was intrigued.

I learned the stories of these girls and how they managed 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, named so in honor of

Polynesia's first female surfers. Brown Girl Surf is a stage 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 perception 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.

So I know what your question is. Aside from the fact that surfing is really cool, why do I care about these stories? Why should you? To me, these stories matter because they represent living in possibility, and I think this is a message we all need to see more of in the world. We need to know about Argentina's first female big wave surfer who picked up a surfboard at the age of 20 and then surfed every major big wave by the time she was 30. This represents possibility. We need to know how Ishita, a journalism student at a college in India, picked up a surfboard and ended up moving to the coast to teach surfing to her community where women just don't do that. That's possibility. We need to know how the 15-year-old girl in Gaza manages to break tradition and surf past the age of 15 into her adulthood. It's her way of saying, "nobody will have control of what I do with my body." That is possibility. These stories inspire others to go after their dreams. People see them and say, if they can do it, so can I. It's like a domino affect to social change.

This November, I am proud to announce that I will be journeying to India and Bangladesh to meet the first female surfers. You can be part of our campaign for this unique project at [www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility](http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility). Through Brown Girl Surf, I wish to inspire activism within girls of all cultures to live boldly in tune with their bodies and to inspire the world to embrace alternative images of risk taking in diverse cultures.

To me, surfing is just a metaphor for the waves of possibility. Our world, and our girls, need more examples of living in possibility. I invite you all to hop on board and journey along with me. I also challenge you to surf your own wave, whatever it may be.

Farhana first stood on a surfboard at age 26, not realizing she would eventually fall in love with the sport that would lead her to start Brown Girl Surf. [www.browngirlsurf.com](http://www.browngirlsurf.com). Surfing Possibility: Stories of India and Bangladesh's First Female Surfers: [www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility](http://www.indiegogo.com/surfingpossibility)

© 2024 India Currents  
Powered by Newspack