How clean are your diamonds?

It's been a few years since the jewellery industry began asking questions about conflict diamonds, and since then much has been done to help the trade clean up its act. But is the problem resolved?



▼ Arabel Lebrusan

So much is talked about synthetic diamonds, that maybe we no longer need be concerned about so-called 'conflict diamonds'. But is that the case? Should we still be on our guard, even with the Kimberley Process (KP) and Responsible Jewellery Council (RJC) fighting this particular corner?

We spoke to Estelle Levin-Nally of Levin Sources, who consults on responsible mining and sourcing, for an update, and asked jewellers Harriet Kelsall Bespoke Jewellery and Arabel Lebrusan, to explain how they work ethically.

Defining the Problem

Diamonds are still associated with conflict, in Central African Republic, for example, and stones from this conflict continue to get laundered into conventional markets. However, it's vital, says Levin-Nally, that industry begins to understand 'conflict diamonds' beyond this narrow definition.. "If diamonds want to be seen as embodying notions of purity and love, then it's not enough to say KP compliant," she argues. "It's also about ensuring risks associated with human rights violations and responsible business conduct are well managed. The industry can't greenwash its way out of it."

Joanne Lebert of civil society group IMPACT recently said: "Image is everything to the value of diamonds, yet the industry continues to be tainted by association with human rights abuses like child labour and forced labour, as well as conflict, environmental damage and corruption. It needs to clean up its act."

While the KP (launched 2003) has achieved much to prevent conflict diamonds from entering the distribution chain, there are acknowledged shortfalls in its system. As 2019 marks the final year of KP's three-year review, a tide is turning. "The good news is that we're seeing the shift and the World Diamond Council (WDC), together with the RJC, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development) and some industry players are leading the way" says Levin-Nally.

In a recent meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on the role of diamonds in fuelling conflict, WDC president Stephane Fischler stressed that the KP, as part of urgently-required reforms, needed to expand its definition of 'conflict diamonds'. "This is a challenge for the diamond business world – but it is manageable," says Levin-Nally, who has been working with the NAJ to provide easy-to-follow due diligence guidance for members as part of the NAJ's Better Business Pathway, based on guidance provided by the OECD, the EC, the RJC and others, she adds). "In a business based on trust and integrity, retailers need to be protected from making false claims in the market and supply chain due diligence is crucial for avoiding that."

The key message to diamond buyers wanting to source responsibly is to decide what matters to you and put that in responsible sourcing policy. Then ask questions to see if your business partners' activities meet your own policy commitments. "Ask your supplier what criteria they are applying to ensure their diamonds are responsibly mined and traded. If there's a problem in the supply chain, they should tell you about it and tell you how they are fixing it. Transparency is the first and foremost issue because knowing your risks, is half way to managing your risks."

Working Reponsibly

How do you ensure that diamonds you buy are as clean as they can be?

Arabel Lebrusan: Since last year's KP meeting – their vague results and lack of achievements – we've decided to source mainly Canadian diamonds with an assurance on provenance. They have a Canada mark, are conflict-free and come with a certificate of origin.

Harriet Kelsall: We put considerable effort into guaranteeing the diamonds we use are conflict-free. We're RJC members and together with them, the NAJ and our stone dealers, are working extremely hard to ensure that no conflict diamonds are used in engagement rings in the UK. As part of this commitment we're not prepared to work with customers' own diamonds that have been sourced by them, that don't have adequate conflict-free guarantees. We will, however, remove and reuse stones from antique jewellery because the piece pre-dates the Process. In these cases we'll use documentary evidence, to be confident that the stone's age fits the age of the piece.

Is there a chance that rogue gems will slip through the net?

HKBJ: We know that the KP has dramatically improved the diamond industry, but it has been proven to be heavily flawed. We feel that it's still a lot better than nothing though, which is why we ensure that the diamonds we buy are always KP-certified.

Currently, very few diamonds are fully traceable because of how the diamond market works. They're only truly traceable if you're big enough to own your own mines. You can never say a diamond came from a specific hole in the ground in the developing world and if your diamond dealer tells you that you can, they're likely incorrect. Even De Beers site holders can't say this as all their stones are aggregated.

What we'd really like to do is source conflict-free stones from conflicted areas as we feel this would benefit the most people. So far this hasn't been possible and we know it's a huge undertaking... but we hope to work on this.

What does 'ethical' mean to you?

AL: That's the tricky bit. For us, to know the provenance of a diamond is the first place to start. If you don't know where a diamond comes from, how can you make any claim. So, at the moment, as far as I know, only Canadian and Australian diamonds come with some assurance of provenance.

HKBJ: People in the jewellery industry talk a lot about traceability and seem to be less worried about transparency, but we feel that they are equally important. We're trying as a company to improve both traceability and transparency and bring the rest of the jewellery industry with us.

Are synthetic diamonds one potential solution (in your view)?

HKBJ: We're always really pleased to discuss the ethics of our jewellery and are happy to work with both synthetic and naturally mined diamonds. Both are interesting ethical options and we feel that it's important to offer both, depending on a customer's sense of what's right for them. When working with synthetic diamonds we ensure full clarity and disclosure.

While synthetic stones are traceable they're created in wealthier countries –this tackles just a small part of the ethical dilemma. Mining supports millions of people worldwide who often have no other access to employment. We believe in trying to support those at the bottom of the diamond supply chain – who have no option other than to make a living by mining. We like our stone buying to do good in developing countries. We're currently working on a project to try to source traceable diamonds mined by artisans... this is going to be quite a journey.

AL: No. The solution will be to fix the diamond market; to make sure provenance is required for all diamonds, that they're tracked throughout the supply chain, and that everyone involved in their production, small scale artisan or big corporation, get paid a fair price.

Using synthetic diamonds instead, is just ignoring the problem. Ethical jewellery and materials have the great potential of transforming lives for the better, in Africa and many other parts of the world. Using synthetic diamonds, created in a lab in Antwerp, throws that potential down the drain. I see a world where natural and synthetic diamonds can coexist, with full disclosure of origin, and fulfilling different customers' dreams.

Questions to Ask Diamond Dealers

AL:

- Where are the diamonds from? If they just say that their diamonds 'are from De Beers' (or any other company) and conflict-free...
- Ask which stock-holder they're from
- Does that stock-holder have diamonds from other companies
- If so, how do they keep their diamonds segregated.

Most diamonds dealers cannot answer past question two, not because they're hiding anything, but because they don't know.

HKBJ:

- Ask for a written guarantee that they will do all they can to avoid conflict diamonds
- Ask about KP guarantees
- Don't think a certificate/report guarantees good ethics or conflict-free
- If your dealer says they can guarantee origin country and it's in the developing world, even if they are site holders, they actually can't. Avoid dealers who don't know what they are talking about!

Red Flags:

- A dealer who tells you exactly where the stone he's selling has come from in a developing country. Claims need to be backed up
- A dealer who tells you a GIA cert is a guarantee of origin – it definitely isn't
- If there's a problem in your supplier's supply chain, they should say so – transparency is the most important thing
- Buying diamonds on the open market, like at a trade fair, is much riskier