

Is There Such A Thing As Fair Trade Jewelry?

A Google search for “fair trade jewelry” will bring up numerous companies, many of which sell ethnic jewelry produced in small villages in the developing world. The concept draws the socially responsible shopper, yet the third party labeling organization, Fair Labeling Organization ([FLO](#)) - of which [Transfair USA](#) is a member - does not currently list jewelry. Apart from that, some large players in the mainstream jewelry industry are beginning to tout concepts such as “fair trade” diamonds [LINK](#) <http://www.fairjewelry.org/archives/65> and gold.” [LINK](#) <http://www.communitymining.org/qseng.htm> So how does one make sense of these jewelry claims, especially as they relate to the \$150 Billion mainstream jewelry industry?

Investigating the Self-Proclaimed Fair Trade Jewelers

[Global Exchange](#) comes up number one on Google in the organic, unpaid listings for the “fair trade jewelry search. The Transfair logo at the bottom of their website would lead a shopper to believe that their jewelry, like the coffee they sell, is third party certified.

In the context of their claim, I emailed them, asking about the source of their precious metal and the environmental safeguard for their manufacturers— proper ventilation and disposal of toxic chemicals used in the manufacturing of the jewelry they sell. Finally, sterling silver is supposed to be .925% silver. Imports out of small villages in developing countries are notorious for labeling as sterling silver jewelry which has less silver content than real sterling silver.

Global Exchange wrote back explaining that their jewelry is made in a village by small scale artisans and fair working conditions, which they monitor. They could not answer questions about the environmental practices of these small manufacturers and did not monitor sterling content.

This application of the term “fair trade” to jewelry by Global Exchange is backed by a [fair trade](#) concept that exists outside of FLO. Global Exchange also referred me to the Fair Trade Federation ([FTF](#)), of which they are a member. [FTF's website FAQ](#) pages lists jewelry as a product. I interviewed [Carmen Jezzi](#), the executive director of FTF, which helped me understand that FTF has nothing to do with products: only businesses that sell them—a subtle distinction probably lost on the average person.

Global Exchange, at least, has some history behind their ethical stance; there are many companies and stores using the concepts of “fair” and “eco” around their products with more questionable **accountability**. [LINK](#) <http://www.fairjewelry.org/archives/67>

Though “fair trade” jewelry is helping some villagers in the developing world, it is a negligible niche market in the *mainstream* jewelry industry as a whole, which does over hundred and fifty billion dollars annually.

The Difficulty of Fair Trade in the Main Stream Jewelry Industry

Taking the concept of “fair trade” jewelry out of the village and into the mainstream global jewelry market (think gold, diamonds, bling bling) is like banging that old square peg in a round hole. At present, the industry is totally commodity based and price driven, somewhat like lumber or oil. Ethical sourcing is just not part of the paradigm.

Consider the general conditions required for a fairly trade item which is fairly straight forward: coffee. The beans are organically grown often in farms that work collectively, fostering entrepreneurship which translates into broader community prosperity. Third party certification assures a level of integrity that the ethical consumer buying at Whole Foods feels good about.

To translate the same concept into a jewelry product, one would have to factor in labor and environmental practices in the sourcing of precious metal and gemstones. Mining and development of the raw material — metal refining and gemstone cutting - are additional steps. Manufacturing a finished product presents another process with its own labor and environmental issues. Plus, there is a wide range of jewelry products, from toy rings to the high end. Attempting to come to an agreed upon criteria of what is ethical with such an elaborate, disparate supply chain is daunting.

The Ethical Sourcing Movement in the Mainstream Jewelry Industry

Meanwhile, a small segment of passionate, dedicated people in the mainstream jewelry industry are attempting to define “ethical sourcing”, with the ultimate aim of some kind of agreed upon criteria leading to true, third party certification. This is going to be a long process. An Ethical Jewelry Summit organized by [Earthworks Action](#) is scheduled in Washington DC in [late October, 2007](#).

The jewelry industry derives most of its revenues from diamonds, precious and gemstones and precious metal. The ethical sourcing movement has attracted the interest of governments, large corporations and the World Bank, where the Washington meeting is to take place.

Most raw materials in the jewelry industry are sourced from small scale mining, and efforts are under way to bring ethical practices to this sector. FLO’s early efforts focus on [ARM](#) (Association For Responsible Mining). Some companies, such as the [Rapaport Group](#) and [Columbia Gem House](#), have taken strong initiatives on their own, extrapolating the fair trade concept to apply to gemstone sourcing. However, precious metals and gems in themselves do not make up an entire piece of jewelry.

Though a finished piece of jewelry could be analogous to a fair trade chocolate bar which may have parts that are independently certified, we cannot have ethically sourced jewelry without addressing manufacturing which has its own labor and environmental concerns. Unlike coffee, mainstream jewelry cannot be easily manufactured in a developing world village because it requires a huge initial investment in equipment and raw materials.

Apart from companies that source their manufactured products from [ethical factories](#), the most notable experiment in this regard is taking place in South Africa in a project called, [Vukani-Ubuntu](#). The project essentially trains people from local townships into the main steam jewelry trade, providing training, mentoring and equipment. It is

heavily supported by government and NGOs. But according to Lores Mares, CEO of the [South African Jewelry Counsel](#), one of the most difficult challenges is bringing the product to a market.

Jewelry is strictly a commodity that is heavily cost driven. This ethical sourcing concept does not bring added value because the market is undeveloped. My [anecdotal research](#) shows that the progressive, green shopper who buys from [Patagonia](#) does not feel at ease with a typical jewelry sales person. Winning the progressive eco demographic back will be easy. Yet those in the mainstream jewelry world who are involved are sincere and heavily driven by humanitarian concerns—with the possible exception of the larger corporations who may be joining to polish their blood diamond, dirty gold image.

Though millions of websites reference “fair trade jewelry,” the designation is, at this point, too ambiguous for all but a few main stream jewelry manufacturers to use. The consumer interested in ethically sourced jewelry needs to look for detailed information as to sourcing, labor and environmental practices. At present, [transparency](#) is often [more valuable](#) to the consumer than any designation.