



# DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

The exploitation of rough diamonds propelled a brutal civil war in Sierra Leone. Discover how the diamond industry is transforming its painful past into the promise of a more brilliant future

Words by Sara Mohazzebi



Utterly beautiful and eternally special. It's undeniable that when one gets engaged, the sparkling diamond ring you receive is more than just 'another' piece of jewellery. Diamonds, with their strong cultural and emotional significance, represent elegance and the promise of a happy ending. But what if the journey of the diamond from origin to your left hand was tarnished and its history flawed. What if its story also signified tragedy? And what if the diamond you fell in love with was unethically sourced? Does the sheen rub off or the diamond lose its sparkle?

Not until recently, with the film *Blood Diamond* becoming a critically-acclaimed Hollywood hit in 2006, did the world realize that many diamonds are in fact not ethically mined or traded. Set against the backdrop of the civil war that raged from 1991 to

2002 in the West African country of Sierra Leone, the film unveiled how the rebel army Revolutionary United Front (RUF) brutally gained control over the nation's diamond mines. The RUF was mining for diamonds in the war zone and using profits from those rough diamond sales to finance their ruthless attack on Sierra Leone's legitimate government. These diamonds earned the notorious term 'blood diamond' and over 50,000 lives were lost and thousands of innocent lives were changed forever due to the massive atrocities committed by the RUF. From abducting children and forcing them into combat to amputating civilians' limbs to prevent them from voting, Sierra Leone was destroyed under the wrath of the RUF and it became the devastating face of the blood diamond crisis to the international community. Unfortunately, blood diamonds weren't limited to Sierra Leone and the civilian populations from the African countries of ▶



IMAGE GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES



IMAGE GRAPHEAST/CORBIS

## MAKE YOUR MONEY MATTER

✦ Even the smallest donation makes a difference. Check out Shine on Sierra Leone's Spare Change programme which takes your monthly spare pocket change and funds educational needs for several schools in Sierra Leone. The organisation offers numerous affordable opportunities to make a difference.

[www.shineonsierra Leone.org](http://www.shineonsierra Leone.org)

✦ Did you know that while polished diamonds look similar, no two rough diamonds look alike? For a unique rough diamond jewellery piece, check out [www.ruffandcut.com](http://www.ruffandcut.com). Actresses Julianne Moore, Anne Hathaway and Brooke Shields are all fans of the line and its proceeds go to Shine on Sierra Leone.

✦ Join Sabiha Foster, the founder of Diamonds for Humanity, at [www.diamondsforhumanity.com](http://www.diamondsforhumanity.com) to continue the international dialogue with the visionary thought leader that emphasises the exceptional role that diamonds do and will play in improving humanitarian conditions in Africa's diamond mining countries. Foster, an acclaimed designer, can also be privately commissioned to design jewelry with profits going to the NGO Africa-America Institute.

✦ Tiffany & Co through its Tiffany Foundation and the DeBeers Group through its DeBeers Fund actively offer social responsibility programmes. To learn more, go to [www.tiffanyandcofoundation.org](http://www.tiffanyandcofoundation.org) and [www.debeersgroup.com](http://www.debeersgroup.com)

With about 65 per cent of the world's diamond supply and close to US \$8.5 billion dollars worth of diamonds coming from African countries

Left: A man separates large stones as they mine for diamonds in Bo District, Sierra Leone

Right: Miners from Sierra Leone washing gravel in large sieves looking for rough diamonds in the mining pits outside Koidu town in Kono district, eastern Sierra Leone



IMAGE GRAPHEAST/CORBIS

Angola, Liberia, Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Congo suffered a similar fate. The film left many wondering if the cost of a diamond ring was the cost of a human life, and how and why anyone could conscientiously buy diamonds again?

On a balmy night in the autumn of 2009 in Los Angeles at a celebrity student fundraising event for Shine on Sierra Leone, a non-profit human services organization, the harsh reality of the blood diamond crisis was brought to the fore. The profit of diamonds isn't limited to the purpose of corruption and the public's access to sheer luxury. Diamonds are an invaluable and much-needed source of income and in countries such as poverty-stricken Sierra Leone, it would be an unbearable economic loss to abandon their largest primary natural

resource and what constitutes almost half of their national gross domestic product.

Tiffany Persons, the founder of Shine on Sierra Leone, was introduced to the aftermath of the blood diamond catastrophe when she filmed a documentary on the journey of a diamond from the mines to the polishing stage. What Persons quickly realized was that, "banning diamonds doesn't solve anything. Sierra Leone is one of the poorest and most

uneducated countries in the world and it needs to be able to benefit from a resource that has enormous value. Instead, it comes down to the diamond industry and consumers having ethical principles in how they conduct business and using profits from diamond sales to promote economic stability and growth in mining communities."

The voices of human rights activists such as Persons and the outcry throughout the international community did not fall on deaf ears. With about 65 per cent of the world's diamond supply and close to US\$8.5 billion worth of diamonds coming from African countries combined with the public's awareness of human rights violations thanks to films such as *Blood Diamond*, the diamond industry has made significant progress toward eliminating blood diamonds. In 2000, prominent members of the diamond industry including the DeBeers Group, Tiffany & Co. and Damas created the World Diamond Council with the goal of ensuring that a diamond would remain conflict-free from mining to the consumer.

But what ultimately helped transform the diamond industry took place when the Sierra Leone Civil war ended in 2002. An international coalition of non-governmental organizations, governments and the diamond industry, particularly the World Diamond Council, came together to develop a resolution known as the Kimberly Process Certification Scheme. In order ►

to halt the trade in blood diamonds, the United Nations-backed process certifies the export and import of diamonds to be conflict free, imposes criminal charges on anyone trafficking in conflict diamonds, and institutes a ban on any individual found trading in conflict diamonds from the World Federation for Diamond Bourses.

Despite criticism that it is a voluntary resolution and not legally binding throughout the entire international community, the Kimberley Process currently has 74 countries adhering to its regulations and the World Diamond Council reports that blood diamonds have been reduced to only make up one per cent of trade in the diamond pipeline. For the most part, the Kimberly Process has been effective in establishing commitment by the industry's biggest players in eliminating conflict diamonds. Lynette Gould of the iconic DeBeers Group, which became famous with their 'A diamond is forever' slogan and the world's largest trader of rough diamonds owning 40 per cent of the diamond supply, states that DeBeers "strictly

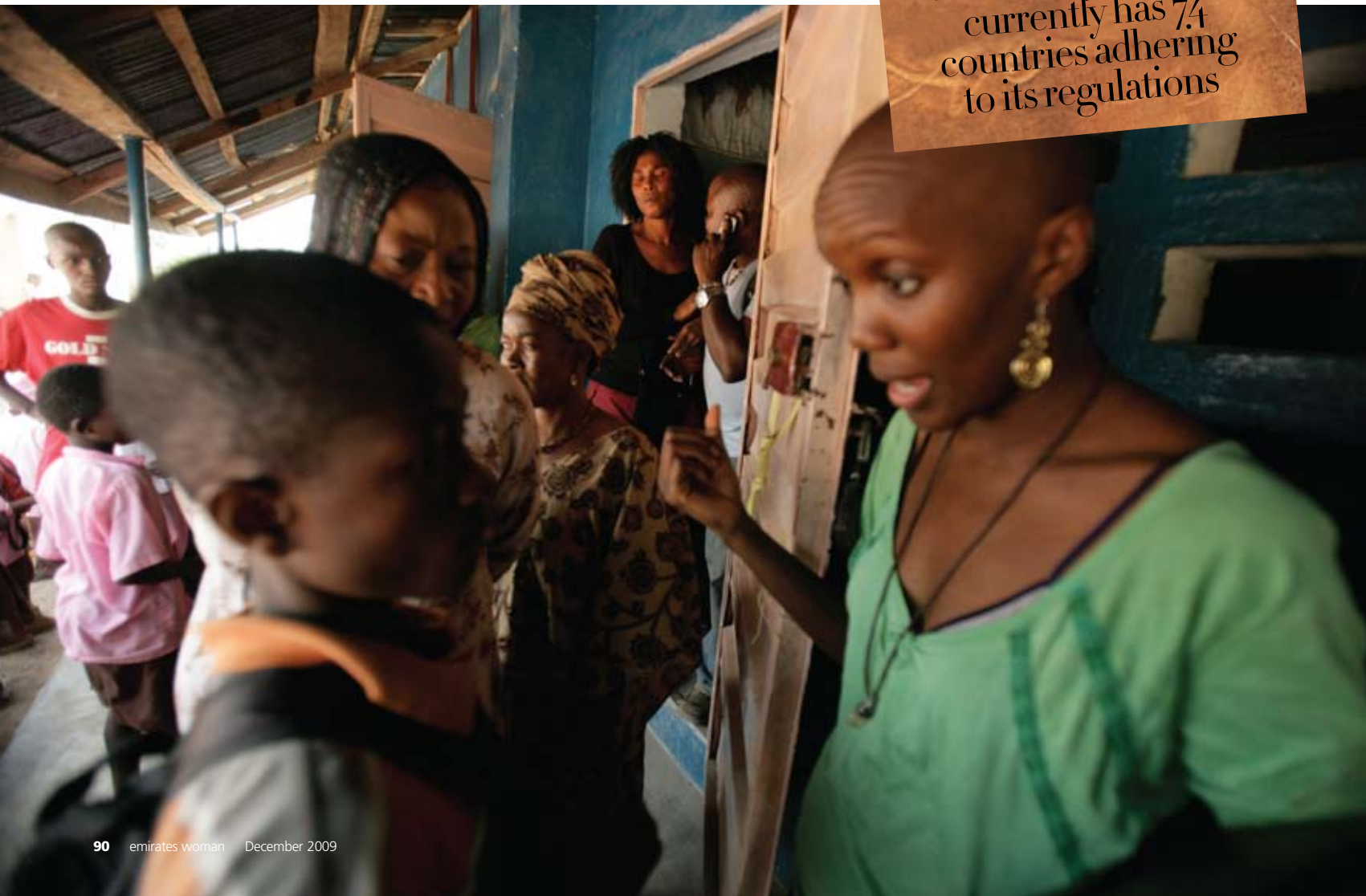
adheres to its zero tolerance policy towards conflict diamonds". Ultimately with major jewellers such as DeBeers, Tiffany & Co and Van Cleef & Arpels partaking in the Kimberly Process, the biggest impact is seen in export profits. Sierra Leone, for example, legally exported US\$125 million in 2006 versus reporting almost no royalties in the late 1990s.

However, for the diamond industry to truly evolve in positively impacting the African countries from which its products and profits rely on, it must do more than put an end to the blood diamond trade. Wade Watson, a prolific social venture capitalist in charge of corporate social responsibility for the Sierra Leone-based diamond mining company Pride Diamonds (Target Resources) reveals that real progress lies in addressing social issues facing mining communities. Watson advocates that "we need to place an enormous amount of priority on the serious social issues that these mining communities are dealing with. In Sierra Leone, we're talking about a country that is void of any social infrastructure. This is a country that is one ►

**Below:** Teachers and parents standing outside SOSL sponsored school classroom  
**Right:** Men mine for diamonds in Bo District, Sierra Leone



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**Left:** SSSL volunteers building a school classroom  
**Below:** Wade Watson in Sierra Leone with local boys and students



## HOW TO BUY A DIAMOND

When purchasing a diamond, you can choose to have luxury with a conscience. Make sure to ask your jeweller if they participate in the Kimberly Process and to see a certificate of warranty for proof of conflict-free purchase and origin.

Nicholas Luchisinger, the Heritage collection curator and NYC boutique director of the legendary French jeweller Van Cleef and Arpels (which is a member of the Council for Responsible Jewelry Practice and partakes in the Kimberley Process), shares with us the four essential elements known as the Four Cs in the diamond industry plus Van Cleef's own special element to remember while picking out your perfect diamond.

**Colour:** The whiter a diamond, the more rare and precious it is. Diamonds are assessed on a letter scale starting with D (the most colourless diamond) and follow it by succeeding alphabet letters to Z for the most highly coloured (or yellow diamonds). Luchisinger reveals, "Van Cleef only sells diamonds of exceptional colour belonging to categories D and E".

**Clarity:** A clear diamond equals a precious diamond and it's very rare for a diamond to be utterly clear.

**Carats:** the weight of a diamond is measured in carats (one carat is 0.2 grammes). A diamond weighing more than 0.2 carats is exceptional.

**Cut:** The cut of a diamond refers to its proportions, shape, and quality of finish. An ideally cut diamond reflects brilliantly.

**Character:** While the diamond industry traditionally is known for applying the Four Cs, Van Cleef and Arpels believes there is a fifth element to factor in – character. "It's more than just having a beautiful piece of jewellery. We select diamonds that are stones with character and soul," says Luchisinger. And for those of us who want to infuse our diamonds with our own personal style and character, Van Cleef and Arpels offers 'Design your Dream' where you can meet with their designers and create custom-made diamond jewellery at their workshops in Paris and New York City.

[www.vancleef-arpels.com](http://www.vancleef-arpels.com)



of the 10 most diamond-rich countries and yet it has the lowest gross domestic product, the lowest life expectancy, and the highest infant mortality rate in the world. It also has an illiteracy rate of 35 per cent and 15 per cent of children do not live past the age of 10 years old." At Pride Diamonds, the local community deeply benefits and rightfully so from the wage quality, the gender equality, the eco responsibility, land profiling, and community development that the mining organisation provides and solely sells its diamonds to a subsidiary owned by Tiffany & Co.

In addition to his work with Pride Diamonds, Watson owns Ruff & Cut Jewellery – a unique jewelry line with rough diamonds and recycled gold, which donates part of its profits to Shine on Sierra Leone. He aims "to connect the consumer with the philosophy

that the DNA of a diamond matters. Where it was mined and who it supports matters." Tiffany Persons wholly agrees with Watson's philosophy and has successfully fundraised over three quarters of a million US dollars for Shine on Sierra Leone. Her organisation has managed to finance nine schools of primary and secondary students, run a nationwide computer literacy programme, provide micro-credit loans and launch an adult literacy programme for the parents of supported students. With a passion and dedication that is infectious, Persons believes "consumers must realise that there is a true power to their diamond purchases."

As women and consumers of diamonds, we have both the privilege and responsibility to choose a diamond that will improve lives. Now that is something that will truly last forever. ■