



The Sophumelela co-operative's brightly coloured bag, nicknamed the Carla, is helping its women makers to earn a good wage in an area dominated by violence

Carla carries on the good work with a bag from the townships

South Africa
Ian Evans Cape Town

She may not like nude pictures of herself on one particular handbag, but Carla Bruni has been happy to endorse another bag made in a South African township to help a women's co-operative to stitch their way out of poverty.

After a visit to Khayelitsha, on the edge of Cape Town, this year she was presented with a cotton and hessian-stitched bag in the six colours of the South African flag. The co-operative was then able to persuade a Paris fashion boutique called Colette to sell the bags, which retail at €90 (£85). Nicknamed the "Carla", only 421 have been made, just under half of which have been exported. Sales in Paris are doing well.

The bag was made by the Sophumelela co-operative — "We will succeed" in the local Xhosa language — set up with the help of Township Patterns, which assists the women with marketing, product design and administration.

Ms Bruni's support for the bag is in contrast to an incident with another manufacturer. Last week her lawyers took legal action against a bag-making company in the Indian Ocean island of Reunion, seeking \$160,000 (£110,000) damages for selling a bag featuring a nude picture of her.

Township Patterns was established in 1998 by Nicole-Marie Iresch, a Frenchwoman who gave up her career at Air France to concentrate on nurturing township talent. Based on fair-trade principles, the company helps three sewing co-operatives to sell a range of bags to businesses, charities and other organisations, and also on its website.

Its profile was raised immeasurably when Ms Bruni visited the Sophumelela workshop. The former model and singer was accompanying her husband Nicolas Sarkozy, the French President, on a trip to Cape Town to see the then President, Thabo Mbeki, when she accepted an invitation to look around the premises.

Patricia Rwayimani, 29, said: "She is a beautiful lady, a nice woman and very friendly."

Ms Rwayimani, the chairwoman of the co-operative, where she has worked for five years, said that they were excited by the "Carla" being on sale in Paris. "I am overwhelmed that these are being sold in France. To think Ms Bruni is walking around with one of our handbags is a big thrill."

Sophumelela employs nine women, working from 8am to 5pm. Depending on orders, they can earn up to R3,700 (£255) a month — a good wage in South Africa.

Christophe Labesse, who is married to Ms Iresch and is operations manager, said: "It was important for the women to work near their homes because they didn't want to travel into Cape Town."

He compared the relationship between Township Patterns and the co-operatives to that of a parent and a child. "We nurture the co-operatives like a child, help them grow up and stand by themselves, but we're still here to help, and obviously to get orders." On a good week the co-operatives make around 500 bags, with Township Patterns acknowledging that governmental pressure to reduce the use of plastic bags has proved opportune.

Mr Labesse said: "Carla Bruni is a very stylish lady, so we were pleased she accepted our gift. She's always being photographed, so we can't ask any more than that. She was pleased with the bag and I'm told she does use it."

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