

**in conversation**

***On 26 February 2014, Kevin Sneider and Mandy Conidaris (OOTC) held an informal conversation with Sheila Flynn about the Kopanang process in helping the project women. This short description about the motivation behind the project follows two simple questions.***

**OOTC - What would you say were the key elements of the Kopanang process of support?**

**SF** - Primarily it is about the empowerment of women – providing them with a space to start finding practical ways to empower themselves.

**OOTC - Empowerment is quite a broad concept. How do you break it down in practical terms?**

**SF** - There are three ways we have found effective, and they are all interlinked – two relate to aspects of traditional therapy and the other with creativity.

In terms of therapy, we firstly give the women a supportive environment to tell their stories. The nature of this community is such that the stories are often harrowing – the loss of family due to HIV/AIDS or their own status, violence ... We make sure that they realise we are hearing their stories, acknowledging what has happened and affirming their experiences in a supportive way. It's about sharing baggage.

Then we bring in creative empowerment. On a practical level, the women are trained in embroidery and sewing. This takes time, and as a result they share their stories among themselves over the handwork, find others who empathise. We encourage them to try to find aesthetic beauty in their own lives. So they develop both technical skills by training, and simple design skills by learning to look at their surroundings with a different eye. Kopanang undertakes commissions, but within each brief there is scope for individual expression – different stitching and personal selection of colours, which adds to the sense of personal affirmation, the understanding that they are allowed to have their own ideas. The acknowledgement of a woman's experience, along with her realisation that others share similar circumstances, promotes a sense of community, feeds the motivation to participate and learn skills, which enables them to generate income – these elements all encourage a rise in self-esteem.

So the process is not only circular in nature, it is self-nourishing.