

# HOW ABOUT?

with Louise Howland



*How often do you find the time to have lunch or coffee with a friend? I'm embarrassed to say, for me, it's probably only once every month or so. Either I'm too busy, highly disorganised, or both. Once I'm out, however, the pressure lifts and I'm happy, interested, and vowing to make more time to maintain this important social contact.*

The girlfriend I met last week is a caring, thoughtful woman. She doesn't like using her open fireplace unless she knows a licensed wood collector has gathered the wood. It's very important to her that we meet at a cafe serving fair-trade coffee, tea and, of course, chocolate. Meeting this friend was one of the best coincidences life ever dished up for me. Our paths crossed when she was doing volunteer work with the honourable Jain Buddhists in India during the early 1980s; I was visiting the city of Ahmedabad, at the same time, purchasing woven textiles for a Melbourne department store. Weaving was a boom industry for this city then, and tens of thousands of rural labourers relocated for the work. When numerous weaving mills closed down later in the 1980s, the effect was felt throughout much of the city, and many families were left without income.

The Spanish order of Dominican Sisters created a centre called St. Mary's Mahila Shikshan Kendra, which is an embroidery-based co-operative, providing dignified and consistent wages for women; they also receive a share of the profits and a voice in the running of the business.

The majority of income is derived from the sale of embroidery.

The embroidery is hand-worked, mainly on cotton, and uses techniques indigenous to the area. Traditional designs, colours and materials are worked into items such as purses, clothes, table linen, cushion covers and other decorative pieces.

Skills have always been shared in settings like these, but the educational component has recently been formalised with the establishment of a more official school. Technique and professional stitching expertise is gained through government-recognised courses.

The centre is a deliberate mix of social, cultural and religious groups – Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist – and understanding is fostered over embroidery. As well as earning part, if not all, the family income, the women gain confidence and self-esteem, and are part of a supportive network that helps provide savings schemes, health care and educational assistance for their children. Hours and places of work are flexible too, so mothers may stitch at home if it suits their household needs.



Oxfam Australia, Trade Aid New Zealand, Ten Thousand Villages North America and One Village UK, all purchase work stitched by the women of Mahila Shikshan Kendra. I know you enjoy making your own gifts, but if time beats you, all of these companies have great shops and you can also purchase their wares online.

When you buy fair-trade products – whether textiles, tea, coffee, chocolate etc – a much larger percentage goes back to the community and into medical services, education, legal aid and community projects.

Now, for that guilt-free coffee and chocolate!

Until next month,

*Louise*