

# DaringCircles

by the Women's Forum for the Economy & Society

#Women4Business

## Leading through adversity: Women entrepreneurs and Covid-19

*A series of interviews by the Women4Business Daring Circle*

**Interview with Anita Dongre**

Founder, The House of Dongre

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 **WOMEN'S FORUM**  
FOR THE ECONOMY & SOCIETY



## **#Women4Business Interviews**

***How are women being impacted by COVID-19, and how are they leading to address the challenges faced by others? To learn, The Women's Forum for the Economy and Society is conducting a series of interviews with women entrepreneurs and ambassadors for women's empowerment around the world.***

***These interviews are unveiling unique insights into the far-reaching impacts of Covid-19, and the diverse ways these inspiring women are responding to the crisis with leadership and innovation.***

## **Beyond recovery: designing an inclusive world**

In the face of the new reality instilled by this pandemic, we are bound together more than ever. Let's dial up our solidarity as we design an inclusive recovery: for the women who continue to be disproportionately affected, and for everyone else who needs their leadership and positive impact. This crisis has reminded us of how critical our work is: of the urgent need to reshape the world together, driven by our **common purpose** to accelerate inclusive progress.

**We care. We share. We dare.**

### **Anita Dongre, Founder, The House of Dongre**

The Women's Forum met with Anita Dongre, creator of The House of Dongre. One of the most successful fashion houses in India, it employs over 2,600 people directly and provides employment opportunities to thousands more. Anita has been a trailblazer at the forefront of Indian fashion for over 20 years, having recognised the need to create and cater to the fashion choices of an Indian woman at a time when few brands existed. For Anita, the business of fashion should be conducted the way it was always meant to be - looking towards the future, practicing and building processes that are sustainable, respectful of the people involved and environmentally conscious.

**Anita, we have been looking forward to hearing your story. As a woman entrepreneur, have you faced any barriers in founding, growing or sustaining your business? How did you overcome these?**

To answer that I'd have to go all the way back. I started my business two decades ago on a balcony with my sister. This was a time when there were barely any women in the workplace. Between being a young woman and working in fashion I just wasn't taken very seriously. I learnt some early lessons in those days about ignoring patriarchy, misogyny and other forms of toxicity, and to just focus on my own dreams. I had very clear goals - so I focused on the women who were rewriting corporate India, continued designing for them and did my job. I had a humble start and reinvested every rupee I earned into the business. The milestone moment was General Atlantic investing in us 6 years back.

**How is your business being impacted by COVID-19, and what are the biggest challenges so far?**

COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown has been very difficult for businesses in general, and retail particularly.

At House of Anita Dongre, we employ over 2600 people and have a huge number of self-employed artisans and business owners depending on us for their daily income, so the uncertainty weighs on me personally. With no sales because of the lockdown for 5 weeks during our key business months, and the cautious purchase sentiment predicted for the rest of this year, it's only going to continue being difficult. I'm trusting in prayer, faith and a lot of work. The most vulnerable however is the daily wage labourer. Not just me, but the whole country will have to ensure that they are looked after.

**How is your business adapting to the changing situation, and how are you leading this?**

Every morning I get on call with the executive and production teams to prepare for a situation that is rapidly changing. With about 650 employees in our production unit we need to be extra vigilant when we make our way back to work. Our priority has always been to keep our employees and customers safe, so we have strict hygiene standards set up for our shops and factories and a thousand other details each day. It's like preparing for war! We're glad the lockdown is beginning to be lifted but we're staying extra alert about the challenges that it brings. Our real work starts then.

**You must have many women-owned enterprises in your supply chain. How is the crisis impacting your suppliers, and are you able to support them in any way?**

It hasn't been easy. We work with a large network of self employed women and entrepreneurs across our vendor networks and the pause in production during our busiest season has been a challenge. The Anita Dongre Foundation set up a medical fund to help with any necessities that arise. Our employees are covered by the corporate medical insurance but given this crisis it became important to us to ensure our partners are secure too. We also set up a helpline, as lots of the people who work with us were very confused about what was going on, which can lead to real anxiety.

This pandemic has shown us that women are on the front lines every single day and also playing a major role in economic development in this country.

2014 onwards, under the Anita Dongre Foundation, we set up training centres in villages just outside of Bombay that have faced a lot of financial struggle. We started teaching stitching and sewing, and have grown from just 40 women to 240! Women come in and earn a monthly income for their families. Since we haven't been able to operate in larger cities due to lockdown, in these villages some people have volunteered to come into the training centre to make masks, which we then give to NGOs, local villagers and hospitals. .

These sorts of initiatives give encouragement to lots of other women too! It inspires them to take charge of their lives. Women will change the future of India, and the silver lining of this crisis might be the recognition of that.

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**What kind of support, from the government or customers, will you need to help your business recover?**

Given the times, support from both customers and the Government is key to helping business recover. As a retail manufacturing business 95% of my employees cannot work from home- my designers, tailors, retail staff etc. all need to be physically present to do what they do. To the Government my request is to allow a delay in tax payments and make bank loans more easily accessible as we continue to support our employees. Loans are a key part of the solution, as long as the interest rates are less brutal and on par with global standards. I hope that customers will choose to buy Indian for the next two years and help keep Indian businesses afloat. This would help businesses like mine recover.

**Looking to the future, do you think anything positive could emerge on the other side from this crisis, or is it too early to say?**

I have definitely been thinking about this and building a reserve fund is on top of my list of positive changes to introduce when this crisis passes! As Indians we have always been encouraged to save more and spend less and this pandemic is a reminder of that wisdom.

But more personally, I think the pandemic will encourage everybody to live mindfully and sustainably. I hope that this crisis will be a reminder of our traditional Indian way of life where we lived frugally, taking care of the earth and animals.

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**Do you have a key message you'd like to share with other women entrepreneurs?**

My thoughts can be summed up in two words- thoughtful growth. We should give up on the capitalist pressure of growth for growth's sake. Businesses need to be sustainable and save for the unpredictable. At the end of the day we must remember that businesses are not merely numbers on a balance sheet- they are the heart, soul and smiles of the people who keep it together. With all this number chasing we can become over ambitious and the most important thing is to enjoy our work, whilst it is happening, as opposed to just pushing numbers and growth. Ultimately the business you build is about community and quality. A well-balanced quality of life is far more important than anything else, and that will show in the company you build.

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The Women4Business Daring Circle is a global coalition of partners, with an ambition to promote and accelerate women's economic empowerment in business and supply chains.

The Daring Circle is led by P&G, in collaboration with Accenture, BNP Paribas, Bouygues, Exxon Mobil, Johnson & Johnson, L'Oréal and Publicis Groupe. The Circle is supported by Knowledge Partner AT Kearney, Insight Partner Clifford Chance, and Institutional Partners WEConnect International and UN Women. Expert Partners include BY.O Group, founder of Catalyst at Large Suzanne Biegel, HEC, senior expert in gender Meg Jones, and founder of the Global Business Coalition for Women's Economic Empowerment Linda Scott.