

“A woman of heart and conviction, Grand Duchess Maria Teresa puts the protection of the most vulnerable and the defence of women’s and young girls’ rights against all forms of violence at the heart of her social and humanitarian action.”

Maria Teresa Mestre was born on March 22nd 1956 in Havana (Cuba).

HER FAMILY

The young Maria Teresa Mestre—along with her parents, Jose Antonio Mestre and Maria Teresa Batista-Falla de Mestre, her two brothers and her sister—left Cuba in 1960, at the time of the revolution led by Fidel Castro.

The family, of Spanish origin, settled in New York, where the Grand Duchess attended Marymount school. From 1961 onwards, she pursued her education at the French School (*École Française*). In June 1965, her parents stayed on the family property in Santander, Spain, for a few months before choosing Geneva, Switzerland, as their permanent home. Just as her two brothers and her sister – Antonio, Luis and Catalina – Maria Teresa has enjoyed an excellent education. While her father worked in the world of finance, her mother, enthusiast of the arts and literature, dedicated herself to her family and conveyed to her children notably the values of Christian faith.

Maria Teresa continued her studies at the Marie-José Institute in Gstaad, then at the Marie-Thérèse boarding school in Geneva, where she successfully completed the French baccalaureate in June 1975. In the meantime, she acquired the Swiss nationality.

It was at university that the Grand Duchess met her future husband, Prince Henri of Luxembourg. They both read Political Science for four years. Their engagement was announced at the end of their university studies.

On Valentine’s Day in 1981, Maria Teresa Mestre married His Royal Highness Hereditary Grand Duke Henri of Luxembourg.

The Grand Duke and the Grand Duchess have four sons and one daughter: Prince Guillaume (born 1981), the current Hereditary Grand Duke of Luxembourg, Prince Félix (1984), Prince Louis (1986), Princess Alexandra (1991) and Prince Sébastien (1992).

On October 7th 2000, the Hereditary Grand Duke ascended the throne and becomes Grand Duke of Luxembourg. Princess Maria Teresa has since borne the title of Grand Duchess of Luxembourg.

Her Royal Highness the Grand Duchess is today grandmother to four grandsons and one granddaughter: Gabriel (born 2006) and Noah (born 2007), the children of Prince Louis of Luxembourg, Amalia (June 15th 2014) and Liam (November 28th 2016), the children of Prince Félix and Princess Claire of Luxembourg, and Charles (May 10th 2020), son of the Crown prince and Crown princess.

SOCIAL AND HUMANITARIAN ENGAGEMENT

Very early on, the Grand Duchess has shown her interest for social and humanitarian causes. She hereby continued a family tradition that had already led her grandparents Augustin Batista Y Gonzalez De Mendoza and Maria Teresa Falla Y Bonet to actively shape philanthropic and cultural life in Cuba. The construction of medical dispensaries offering free treatment in deprived rural areas count among their most remarkable feats. Her grandparents also contributed to the creation of the Havana Philharmonic Orchestra, and remained its principal patrons until the Cuban revolution.

On the occasion of her marriage, the Grand Duchess received a donation that allowed her to create the Foundation that bears her and her husband's name and which She presides. This fund has enabled Maria Teresa to contribute to the integration of vulnerable people or people with special needs into the Luxembourg society.

She provides the high patronage to numerous Luxembourg charities and socio-cultural organisations, including the Luxembourg Red Cross and the Cancer Foundation.

At the heart of her action is the defence of the rights of women and girls and the fight against all forms of violence against them. She is committed to encouraging women to actively participate in building fairer societies based on respect for human dignity and the values of solidarity.

She was appointed Goodwill Ambassador to UNESCO in 1997 for the fight against poverty, girls' education and the promotion of microcredits. In 2007, she became Eminent Advocate for Children at UNICEF for her work on behalf of children orphaned by AIDS and "child soldiers".

Since then, she has continued her commitments in favour of children and education. In January 2016, she organised an International Forum on Learning Disabilities where her son, Prince Louis, testified about his dyslexia.

She has also worked for many years with Professor Muhammad Yunus (Nobel Peace Prize 2006) and is involved in the field of inclusive finance in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Since 2006, The Grand Duchess has been Honorary President of LuxFLAG, the Luxembourg Fund Labeling Agency, which was the first to award a quality label to microfinance investment funds around the world. Since 2005, The Grand Duchess has chaired the international jury for the European Microfinance Prize, which annually rewards initiatives in microfinance and inclusive finance in developing countries.

The high distinctions that The Grand Duchess has received for her humanitarian action are an illustration of this extraordinary commitment: in October 1999, Her Royal Highness The Grand Duchess was appointed *Doctor honoris causa* of Seton Hall University (New Jersey, USA). In February 2003, The Grand Duchess received the title of *Doctor honoris causa* from the University of Leon (Nicaragua) and on 13 June 2006, the Holy See's representation to the United Nations awarded her the *Path to Peace Award*, an annual prize awarded to a personality distinguished for her humanitarian and social commitments. In 2013, the ELPIDA association awarded her the *International Solidarity Award* in recognition of her work on behalf of children who suffer from cancer.

The Grand Duchess' humanitarian and social commitments have often taken her abroad to see the progress of the projects she actively supports in the field. She has visited Nepal, Mali, Bangladesh, Thailand, Bosnia, Laos, Kenya, Senegal, Burundi and more recently Lebanon, taking the plight of children and women in distress to heart.

Following her visit to the central prison of Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, in June 2009, The Grand Duchess discovered the fate of minor children imprisoned for ordinary crimes. In four years, with the help of the Shalom House founded by Maggy

Barankitse, The Grand Duchess's foundation has succeeded in freeing the 600 minors incarcerated in Burundian prisons under inhuman conditions throughout the country. These children then received psychological, legal and educational assistance through the "La main tendue" project, entirely funded by the Foundation of The Grand Duke and Grand Duchess.

In September 2016, The Grand Duchess joined the patronage council of the Asian University for Women (AUW). Based in Chittagong, Bangladesh, the university has trained more than 1200 young girls since its inception in 2008 to become women leaders in Asia.

Because she was particularly affected by the distress, isolation and stigmatisation of women and girls who had been victims of sexual violence in sensitive areas, in 2016 Her Royal Highness received the winners of the Sakharov Prize, Nadia Murad (Nobel Peace Prize 2018) and Lamiya Aji Bachar, two young Iraqi women from the Yezidi community, symbols of women victims of violence from the so-called Islamic State and spokespersons of their community.

It was also in 2016 that The Grand Duchess met Dr Denis Mukwege (Nobel Peace Prize 2018). Deeply affected by his work, she took the initiative to organise the international forum *"Stand Speak Rise Up"* in Luxembourg, in March 2019, to put an end to sexual violence in fragile environments.

The Grand Duchess has been joined by two important strategic partners, Dr Denis Mukwege (Nobel Peace Prize 2018), and Céline Bardet (We are not Weapons of War) to prepare the international forum *"Stand Speak Rise Up!"*.

Three Nobel Peace Prize laureates, Professor Yunus (2006), Dr Mukwege and Nadia Murad (joint Nobel Peace Prize laureates in 2018) will be among the keynote speakers. This international forum will be a platform for debate and exchange between key actors in the fight against sexual violence in fragile environments and the women victims themselves. It will highlight the experiences, actions and recommendations of both representatives of national and international organisations in the field and survivors of sexual violence, who will be at the heart of the conference. The forum will analyse the socio-economic impacts of these crimes and human rights violations. It will also showcase the initiatives that survivors have undertaken to heal, access justice, obtain reparations, make their voices heard and become actors for peace and change.

The Grand Duchess pursues this commitment by launching the *Stand Speak Rise Up!* non-profit organisation in September 2019. The non-profit organisation aims to denounce rape as a weapon of war and sexual violence in fragile environments, to prevent their proliferation and to support victims in their reconstruction and their need for justice.

As part of the preparations of the Forum, The Grand Duchess undertook a humanitarian trip to Lebanon in 2018. She wanted to go on the ground to meet survivors of sexual violence (refugees and migrant women), collect their testimonies and support them in their quest for justice and reparation. She also visited a microfinance project aimed at improving the status of women, particularly refugee women.

In 2018, The Grand Duchess spoke at the "Entretiens de Royaumont" on the theme "Being a woman". In her intervention, she spoke of the serious socio-economic consequences of rape in armed conflicts and in fragile environments. She called for an international alliance of survivors and civil society leaders to strengthen the fight against sexual violence in fragile environments, improve prevention and implement effective and sustainable solutions.

Hobbies and interests

The Grand Duchess loves to spend time with her grandchildren. She is interested in the decorative arts and design, and in her youth she practiced classical dance for 18 years. She also enjoys singing and playing the guitar, and she especially loves walking her dogs.

The Grand Duchess is also fond of skiing, skating, and nautical sports.

A lover of literature, she was on the jury for the *Prix des Princes* prize for historical fiction in Paris in 2016.

In January 2019, The Grand Duchess awarded the "History Prize" to Loris Chavanette for her book "Ninety-five, La Terreur en procès". The presentation of the Stéphane Bern Foundation Prize for History and Heritage of France was held in the presence of Mr Stéphane Bern, founder, and Mr Xavier Darcos, Chancellor of the Institut de France.

