



MAISON DU GRAND-DUC

## **Biography of Her Royal Highness The Grand Duchess**

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Her Royal Highness the Grand Duchess Maria Teresa was born on 22 March 1956 in Havana, Cuba.

“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 engagements.”

Her Royal Highness Grand Duchess Maria Teresa is one of four children of Mr José Antonio Mestre and Mrs Maria Teresa Batista-Falla de Mestre.

On 14 February 1981, Maria Teresa Mestre married His Royal Highness the Hereditary Grand Duke Henri at the *Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Luxembourg*.

They have four sons and a daughter:

- Prince Guillaume (born in 1981), the Hereditary Grand Duke,
- Prince Félix (born in 1984),
- Prince Louis (born in 1986),
- Princess Alexandra (born in 1991)
- Prince Sébastien (born in 1992).

On 7 October 2000, Crown Prince Henri became Grand Duke of Luxembourg. Since then, Princess Maria Teresa bears the title of Grand Duchess of Luxembourg.

Her Royal Highness the Grand Duchess is the grandmother of four grandsons and one granddaughter:



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- Gabriel (born on 12 March 2006) and Noah (born on 21 September 2007), the two sons of Prince Louis of Luxembourg.
- Amalia (born on 15 June 2014) and Liam (born on 28 November 2016), the two children of Prince Félix and Princess Claire of Luxembourg, and
- Charles (born 10 May 2020), son of the Hereditary Grand Duke and Grand Duchess.

## Childhood

The Grand Duchess showed an interest in social and humanitarian causes very early on. This was in line with the family tradition as her grandparents Augustin Batista Y Gonzalez De Mendoza and Maria Teresa Falla Y Bonet had also been involved in philanthropic and cultural life in Cuba. The construction of community clinics offering free treatment in deprived rural areas were among their most remarkable achievements. Her grandparents also contributed to the creation of the Havana Philharmonic Orchestra and remained its principal patron until the Cuban revolution.

Because of the revolution led by Fidel Castro, the young Maria Teresa Mestre, with her parents José Antonio Mestre and Maria Teresa Batista-Falla de Mestre and her two brothers and sister left Cuba in 1960. The family of Spanish origin settled in New York, where the future Grand Duchess enrolled at the *Marymount School*. From 1961 onwards, she pursued her education at the *École Française* (French School). As of June 1965, her parents stayed on the family property in Santander (Spain), for a few months before choosing Geneva (Switzerland) as their permanent home. Like her two brothers and her sister – Antonio, Luis and Catalina – Maria Teresa has enjoyed an excellent education. While her father worked in finance, her mother, passionate about the arts and literature, dedicated herself to her family and conveyed the values of Christian faith to her children.



## Education

After studying at the *École Française* (French School) in New York, Maria Teresa pursued her education from 1965 onwards at the *Institut Marie-José* in Gstaad, then at the *Marie-Thérèse boarding school* in Geneva, where she graduated with a French baccalaureate in June 1975. In the meantime, she became a Swiss citizen.

After her secondary studies, she enrolled at the *Université de Genève* where she studied Political Science. At university, she met her future husband, Prince Henri of Luxembourg, who studied the same subjects.

The Grand Duchess obtained her degree in Political Science in 1980, and on 7 November the same year, their engagement was announced.

## Social and humanitarian causes

Since her marriage in 1981, the Grand Duchess has initiated many projects to support vulnerable people in Luxembourg and across the world, notably through the *Fondation du Grand-Duc et de la Grande-Duchesse*, an association which she presides.

She has granted her patronage to numerous Luxembourgish charities and socio-cultural organisations, such as the Luxembourg Red Cross and the *Fondation Cancer*.

Her actions are guided by the principles of defending 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 solidarity.



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In 1997, she became a "Goodwill Ambassador" by UNESCO for her actions in favour of girls' education and gender equality, women's rights and microfinance. She was nominated "Eminent Advocate for Children" at UNICEF in 2007, committing to defend the interests of children throughout the world.

Ever since, she has been involved in numerous projects helping children and furthering their education. In January 2016, she organised an international forum to give hope to parents whose children are affected by learning disabilities and where her son, Prince Louis, testified about his own dyslexia.

For the past 30 years, she has worked closely with Professor Muhammad Yunus (Nobel Peace Prize laureate, 2006) and has been involved in the fields of microfinance and inclusive finance, topics which she equally promotes in Luxembourg. She is convinced that social business and female entrepreneurship are key for tomorrow's economy. 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. The Grand Duchess has chaired the international Grand Jury for the annual European Microfinance Prize since 2005. This prize rewards initiatives in microfinance and inclusive finance in developing countries.

The Grand Duchess' humanitarian and social commitment has often taken her abroad to see first-hand the progress of the projects she supports. She has visited Nepal, Mali, Bangladesh, Thailand, Bosnia, Laos, Kenya, Senegal, Burundi and more recently Lebanon, taking a particular interest in supporting vulnerable children and women.

In 2009, the Grand Duchess was awarded the prestigious "Steiger Award" in recognition of her work in the category "Charity".



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During a visit to the central prison of Bujumbura (Burundi) in June that same year, the Grand Duchess learned that children were put into prison for minor offences. Within four years, through the *Fondation du Grand-Duc et de la Grande-Duchesse*, and with the help of the *Maison Shalom*, founded by Maggy Barankitse, the project *La Main tendue* (Extending a hand) succeeded in freeing 600 minors incarcerated under inhumane conditions in Burundian prisons. These children then received psychological, legal, medical, social and educational assistance.

In September 2016, the Grand Duchess joined the Council of Patrons of the Asian University for Women (AUW). Based in Chittagong, Bangladesh, the university has trained more than 1,200 young girls to become women leaders in Asia since its creation in 2008.

### Her commitment to women's rights

The Grand Duchess is particularly affected by the trauma, isolation and stigmatisation of women and girls who had been victims of sexual violence in fragile environments and commits herself to their cause from 2014 onwards.

After doing extensive research on the subject, she met with survivors. In 2016, Her Royal Highness met with the winners of the Sakharov Prize, Nadia Murad (Nobel Peace Prize laureate 2018) and Lamiya Aji Bachar, two young Iraqi women from the Yezidi community, who have become symbols for all the 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 laureate 2018). Deeply impressed by his work, she took the initiative to organise with him and with Céline Bardet, founder and director of the association "We are not Weapons of War", the international Forum "Stand Speak



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Rise Up!" in Luxembourg, in March 2019, to put an end to sexual violence in fragile environments.

This international forum, which brought together 50 survivors and three Nobel Peace Prize laureates, Professor Mohammed Yunus, Doctor Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad, attracted 1200 people.

Set up as a true debating platform among the key actors in the fight against sexual violence in fragile environments and the victims themselves, this Forum highlighted the experiences, actions and recommendations of both representatives of national and international organisations and particularly of the survivors of sexual violence, who were at the heart of the debate. The socio-economic impacts of these crimes and human rights abuses were discussed. The survivors presented their initiatives to heal, access justice, obtain reparations, make their voices heard and become actors of peace and change.

The Grand Duchess created the association "Stand Speak Rise Up!" in September 2019 to condemn rape as a weapon of war and sexual violence in fragile environments, prevent their proliferation and support victims in their reconstruction and their need for justice. The association gathers numerous renowned personalities who are committed to help around the world.

In order to be prepared for the Forum, the Grand Duchess made a humanitarian trip to Lebanon in 2018. She met with survivors of sexual violence (refugees and migrants), collected their testimonies and supported them in their quest for justice and reparation. She also visited a microfinance project aimed at improving the conditions of women, especially refugee women.

In 2018, the Grand Duchess was invited to speak at the *Entretiens de Royaumont* on the theme "Being a woman and a victim". She evoked 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 actors to strengthen the fight against sexual violence in fragile environments, improve prevention and implement appropriate reparation tools and recognition.

In 2020, the Grand Duchess was invited to participate in a virtual dialogue by NATO on the subject of sexual violence in conflict zones.

*"We need to move from emotional reactions to action! I am convinced that by putting survivors at the heart of the debate, they will become actors of change!"*

In 2020, she was the Honorary President of the Jury of the *Prix de la Femme d'Influence*, which rewarded women who stood out during the health crisis.

For all these years, the Grand Duchess' ongoing commitment to defend women's rights throughout the world is also illustrated by her numerous projects to support women in Luxembourg.

In 2019 and 2020, she was actively involved in the campaigns organised for the launch of "Orange Week" in Luxembourg and she met with various associations, in particular those active in the protection of victims of domestic violence.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Grand Duchess has maintained regular contact with the associations she supports, through telephone calls, through video messages calling for solidarity, or by participating in campaigns on social networks.

With the *Fondation du Grand-Duc et de la Grande-Duchesse*, she has initiated numerous actions such as giving smartphones and tablets to shelters that



protect victims of domestic violence, and has notably offered financial support to students in precarious situations.

In 2021, the Grand Duchess supported the Vodafone Foundation Luxembourg and the non-profit organisation *Femmes en Détresse* (Women in Distress) in the fight against violence against women and girls by supporting the “Bright Sky” application, which helps victims and their families.

### Honours awarded to the Grand Duchess

The honours that the Grand Duchess has received, amongst others for her humanitarian actions, are an illustration of her extraordinary commitments.

In October 1999, Her Royal Highness Princess Maria Teresa was awarded an honorary doctorate from Seton Hall University (New Jersey, USA).

In February 2003, she received the title of *Doctor honoris causa* from the University of Leon (Nicaragua). In June 2006, the Holy See's Representation to the United Nations awarded her the “Path to Peace Award”, a prize given annually to a person for their humanitarian and social engagements.

In 2013, the ELPIDA association of Friends of Children with Cancer awarded her the “International Solidarity Award” in recognition of her work for children with cancer.

### Interests

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





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Passionate about literature, she was a member of the jury for the literary prize for historical novels, the *Prix des Princes*, in Paris in 2016.

In January 2019, the Grand Duchess awarded the *Prix de l'Histoire* to Loris Chavanette for his book "Quatre-vingt-quinze, La Terreur en procès".