

Bangladeshi foreign friend declared Woman of the Year

COMMENT OFTHE DAY

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SIR FRANK PETERS

Popular Bangladeshi foreign friend, humanitarian and sportswoman Maria Conceicao made headlines this week throughout Europe when the prestigious GQ Magazine Portugal proclaimed her Woman of the Year.

GQ, one of the most successful men's fashion, culture and lifestyle magazines in the world, broke with tradition and instead of honouring a male with its coveted Man of the Year trophy; the magazine honoured a woman instead.

Those who know Maria and her Godly work will agree she's not only deserving of this award, but many more. Accumulating awards and personal recognition, however, is not her objective in life. Her mission is far more noble and beneficial to mankind.

Maria had travelled to Bangladesh many times as a flight attendant with Emirates Airlines. During her stopover days in Dhaka she visited the slums and poor areas of the city distributing clothes, toys and chocolates to children. (Emirates Airlines, through its Foundation helps the poor and needy worldwide and encourages its personnel to do likewise by providing special

bins in Dubai for them to deposit unwanted clothing etc.)

Moved by the poverty she witnessed



to heart-breaking point and learning that many slum children didn't attend

school because they couldn't afford the school uniform, shoes, books or even a pencil, she decided something needed to be done.

In 2005 she made a life-changing decision and quit her job with Emirates and made her first indelible mark of compassion in Dhaka. With little money, no experience, but a heart full of love, benevolence, and compassion, she founded the 'Maria Cristina Foundation', and under the banner of The Dhaka Project she illuminated the area of Gawair with hope (and her infectious smile).

The non-profit foundation set its goal to improve the quality of the lives of underprivileged children in slum areas through education, nutritional food, and health and to develop an environment that allows the children to achieve their full potential.

Today it provides free basic education to slum children up to High School level, balanced nutritious food for their physical development; provides medical support; a counselling service to the children, their families and community at large, and it inculcates faith based moral values for character building.

The foundation has served over 600 children in the slums of Dhaka at

Gawair and Dhakkin Khan.

In her efforts to fundraise and gain needed support for her humanitarian projects, Maria challenged herself once again, transformed herself into a successful sportswoman and she became the first Portuguese woman to climb Mount Everest; holding three records as a marathon runner; and establishing six Guinness World Records. She also attempted to swim the English Channel but was forced to abandon her bid due to overpowering tidal currents.

Upon accepting her GQ award, Maria dedicated it her to her adoptive mother Maria Cristina (the inspiration behind her Maria Cristina Foundation), to the children of Bangladesh, and to her supporters.

Quoting her mother, she said: "Who feeds six, can feed seven' and it is with this motto that I have managed to educate over 600 children and hope to raise enough funds to put the remaining 131 students through school. This award belongs to our generous supporters, without whom I would not be standing here today."

The writer is a former newspaper and magazine publisher and editor, a royal goodwill ambassador and humanitarian