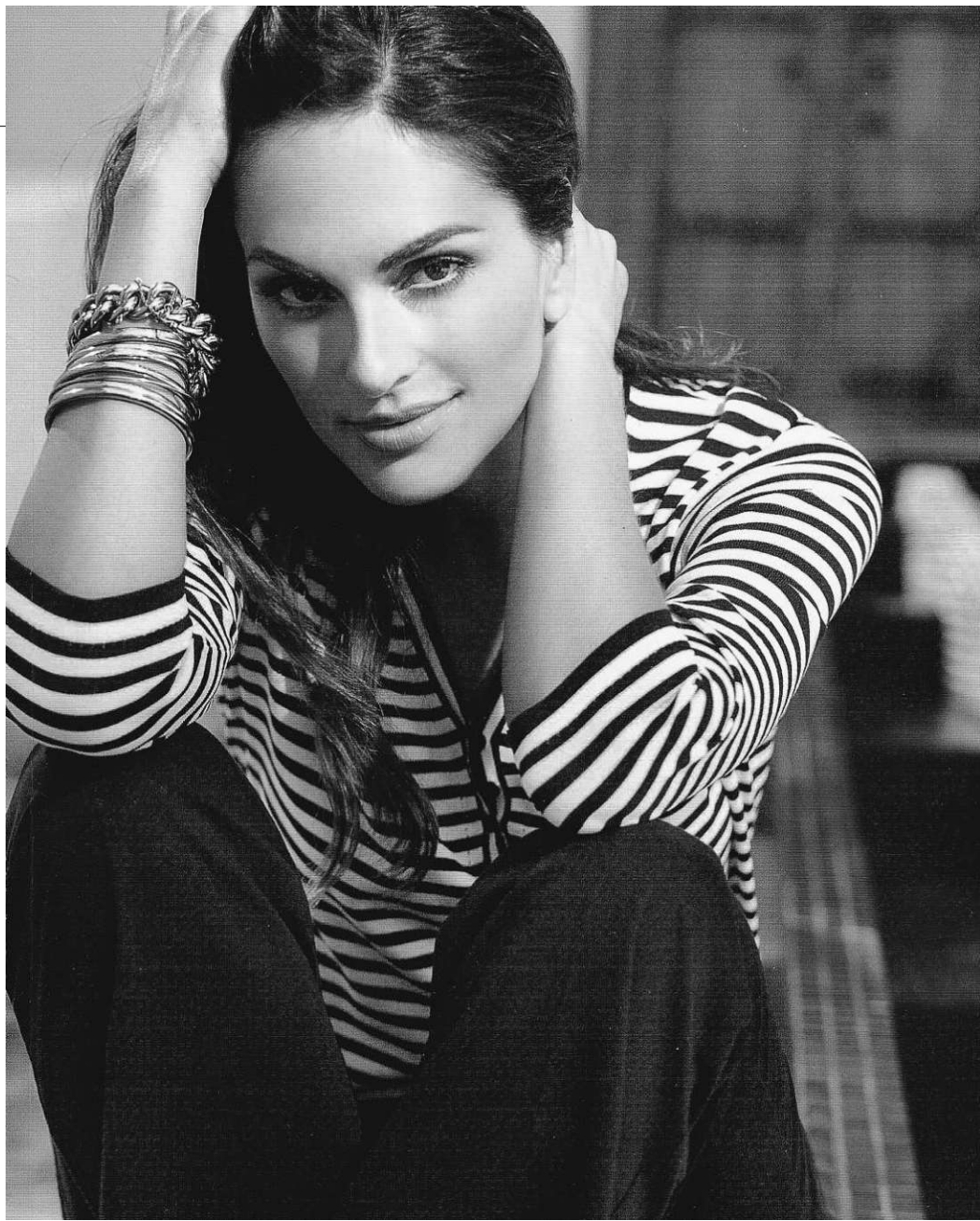


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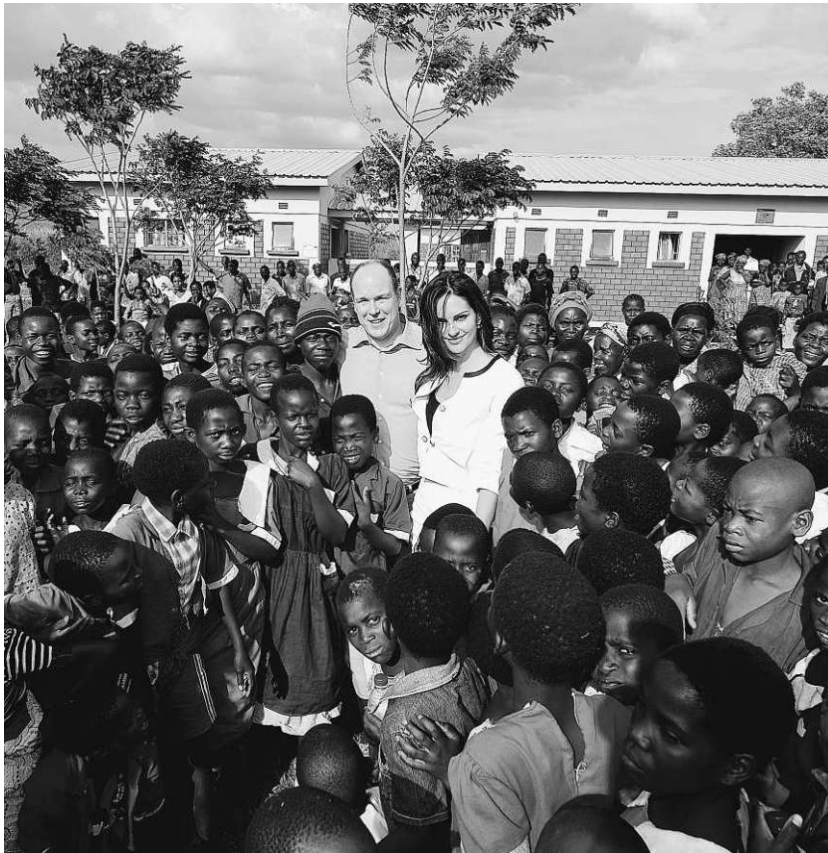


ERIC THAYER/REUTERS

Gisele Bündchen, above, works to protect rain forests in her native Brazil. Rock stars in charity include Madonna, below, who opened a girls' school she helped build in Malawi in October.



PASCAL ROSTAIN



PASCAL ROSTAIN



The Mozambique-born model Tasha de Vasconcelos, above left, has opened a maternity clinic in Malawi. Above, Ms. de Vasconcelos and Prince Albert attending the opening of a new wing at the clinic in November. She must raise €64,000 a year to run the center.

Fashion models start getting their hands dirty

PARIS

World of glamour joins rock stars and actors in promoting charities

BY TARA MULHOLLAND

From Audrey Hepburn to Bob Geldof to Bono, hands-on humanitarian work has long held an appeal for stars who want to give something back. Yet, for all the celebrities in charity, the rarified world of fashion has tended to shun this spotlight. Perhaps an active interest in gritty issues does not seem like such a leap for rock stars — balladeers who speak to the heart and keep it real on the road — or serious actors like, say, George Clooney (messenger of peace for the U.N.) in “Syriana” or Angelina Jolie (good-will ambassador for the U.N. Refugee Agency) in “A Mighty Heart.”

For fashion models, whose caché depends on radiating exclusivity, luxury and expense, hard-core charity work is arguably a less natural mix. With a few exceptions, like Claudia Schiffer’s work for Unicef, fashion celebrities have been reluctant to get their hands dirty. Chic fund-raising events, yes; speaking out at rallies and visiting remote, poverty-stricken villages, no.

Yet, in recent years, as environmental concerns have pushed ecological and ethical luxury into the vogue, so, too, the fashion world has moved closer to the more practical side of humanitarian work. This new embrace was made all the tighter by celebrity models who are going back to their roots and by the global economic crisis, which caused many luxury brands to teeter as the public’s values moved away from thoughtless spending and toward more frugal tastes.

“Nowadays, it is almost expected from celebrities to support some cause,” said Marissa Buckanoff, the chief of Unicef’s celebrity relations and partnership section in New York, pointing out that humanitarian work is now seen as a celebrity duty, regardless of whether the fame comes from music, movies or fashion.

In Africa, the continent whose distress stands at greatest odds with fashion, Tasha de Vasconcelos, a former supermodel and the current face of Nivea,

opened a maternity ward in Kasese, Malawi, in April this year, with the support of Louis Vuitton.

“Maybe it wasn’t so in fashion to be thinking about these causes before, but it’s almost been forced,” she said. “We’re in a different era now. Since the fall of Lehman Brothers, we are responsible to partnerships, to giving and to sharing with others.”

Ms. de Vasconcelos, born in Beira, Mozambique, is familiar with poverty and civil war. The daughter of a Portuguese father and English mother, she was eight when Portugal pulled out of its former colony and civil unrest erupted. The family fled to Zimbabwe, and, then, after Ms. de Vasconcelos’s grandfather was killed by guerillas, to Canada, arriving in 1980 when she was 13 years old.

Spotted by the Elite model agency in Canada at 19, her modeling career blossomed as she was photographed by Steven Meisel for Vogue and began

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working for labels like Dior and Yves Saint Laurent. As her celebrity profile grew, she said, so did her desire to give something back to the troubled continent of her birth.

Ms. de Vasconcelos is not alone among celebrity models wanting to use their fame to help their roots. As fashion tastes moved from the 1990s look of Western healthfulness (Cindy Crawford, Helena Christensen) or urban waifs (Kate Moss, Audrey Marnay) to the current demand for more diversified faces on the catwalk — Slavic, African, Latino — so the origins of the supermodels have also expanded.

Gisele Bündchen’s work to protect rain forests in her native Brazil led her to being named good-will ambassador for the U.N. Environment Program in September. The Sudanese-born supermodel Alek Wek works to help raise health standards in that country. The supermodel Natalia Vodianova, who was discovered in a Russian market where she worked as a teenager in part to help raise her disabled sister, has raised money for her Naked Heart Foundation, which builds playground

parks for Russian children.

Ms. Vodianova works in partnership with Calvin Klein; LVMH has long had a list of humanitarian causes that it supports.

For Ms. de Vasconcelos, the desire among models to go back to their origins is natural: “The circumstances of my birth never left me,” she says.

In the 1990s, Ms. de Vasconcelos began working as a volunteer for Unicef and in 1996 started collaborating with Nelson Mandela’s Children’s Fund. Then, in 2006, using the support of contacts she had made through her fashion career, she founded AMOR, a charity to reduce infant and maternal mortality rates, starting with Africa.

The charity’s first project — the maternity ward in Kasese — was opened in collaboration with Chris Brooks, a Canadian doctor who had founded two hospitals and a clinic in Malawi under his Lifeline Malawi charity. All nurses at AMOR’s clinic are Malawian, trained by Dr. Brooks’s team and paid by AMOR, said Ms. de Vasconcelos, who has undertaken to support the ward for at least three years. The charity’s next mission is to develop the “Collegio Infantil,” an orphanage on the Mozambique street on which Ms. de Vasconcelos was born.

The notoriously tough world of modeling, where rejection is a daily reality, provides good training for models’ fund-raising efforts. Romanticism is not what raises funds, and Ms. de Vasconcelos, who has to find €64,000, or \$92,000, a year for the maternity clinic, acknowledges the need for toughness. “It’s part Mother Teresa, part entrepreneur,” she said. “It’s not like I have a huge public behind me. Yes, a few powerful men of industry at the start” — supporters at AMOR’s founding included Paul Newman and Prince Albert of Monaco — “but you have to make it concrete.”

Her hard work is yielding results. In April, Ms. de Vasconcelos was named ambassador for the Institut Pasteur, a French nonprofit foundation, and in November she was asked by José Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission, to become the face of humanitarian issues for the E.U.

France Télévisions, the French public national television broadcaster, has just finished shooting a 60-minute documentary on her life, which she hopes will raise awareness of AMOR. And another “major fashion house” (she asked to withhold its name until the alliance became official) has pledged support to the charity. And humanitarian work seems to have raised her own profile as model. “My force has clearly moved beyond fashion,” she said. “And I’m being looked at more seriously in the fashion world, perhaps because of that.”

Meanwhile, successful fund-raising meant that Ms. de Vasconcelos was able last month to open a new wing for the Malawian maternity clinic. (She did it wearing Vuitton. “You have to show both: It’s one that brings the other,” she said, explaining that her glamorous image attracts the funding and attention.) Since the clinic opened, the transmission rate from HIV-positive mothers to their children in Kasese has gone from 8 out of 8 to 1 out of 8, Ms. de Vasconcelos said.

“Everything is falling into place this year,” she said. “This is the year when the journey of beauty joined with the journey of credibility.”



KEVIN COOMBS/REUTERS

Natalia Vodianova, above, has a charity for children. At left, Bob Geldof (left) and Bono fight poverty.

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