




PORTFOLIO

Tough Love:
*Las Amorasas
Más Bravas*

PHOTOS BY
BÉNÉDICTE DESRUS

ESSAY BY
CELIA GÓMEZ RAMOS

Victoria, 81, the oldest resident
of Casa Xochiquetzal.



MEXICO CITY—Few imagine what happens to sex workers when they grow old—including sex workers themselves. Casa Xochiquetzal, a shelter in Mexico City, unlike any other in the world, provides them a home to age with dignity. The residents of this shelter, located in city's historic downtown, once sold love—and, in some cases, they still sell it. All are older than 55 years of age and, at one point, lived on the streets.

Even though several Casa Xochiquetzal residents knew each other before, they weren't friends, since they always competed for customers. Perhaps they're not friends now, though they live beneath the same roof. Getting along together hasn't been easy. Survival has made them harsh, tough.

Since 2006, when Carmen Muñoz—herself a former sex worker—founded the shelter, elderly sex workers have been provided with a room and a safe place to keep their belongings. They also receive healthcare and psychological counseling, while a civil-society organization maintains the house day-to-day through donations and with the local government's support. Mexico City lends the building and provides the food.

French photographer Bénédicte Desrus and Mexican writer Celia Gómez Ramos have spent six years with the women featured in their new book, Las Amoras Más Bravas (Tough Love), which features intimate portraits of the residents of Casa Xochiquetzal.

Sex workers age with dignity in Casa Xochiquetzal.

Gloria, in her bedroom,
with her bird.

Community participation is encouraged, and the rules of residency are quite simple. The women are free to continue working the streets, or they can embark on their own small businesses. The shelter is theirs, and it has served more than 300 women since it opened, providing them with identity documents so they can enjoy their civil rights.

PARTY GIRLS NO MORE

Sonia is a 63-year-old woman from Sinaloa. Her family came to Mexico City and used to live comfortably. Sonia liked parties and at one of them, at age 14, she was raped and shot in the head. Since then, she hasn't been able to move her left arm or leg much. But she turned to sex work anyway. She's confident, loquacious, flirty, and stylish.

At the age of eight, Daniela watched her mother say goodbye to her from the back of a trailer, never to see her again. Born in Chihuahua, Daniela worked at

nightclubs and was once married. She didn't walk away from her husband when he hit her—he made good money—but finally left him when he brought other women into their house. Abandoning everything, including her children, Daniela has tried to take her own life twice, yet she practices yoga every day and also tries to be a peacemaker and good housemate. But



MEXICO

her sweet expression can quickly turn to anger. Daniela knits, embroiders, and always stays active. She likes reading the Bible.

Although she remembers being treated well at home, Norma was abused by one of her brothers when she was nine, and was as-

Amalia, 66, puts on makeup before going out to work on the streets of the La Merced neighborhood of Mexico City.



Norma Angelica puts on her high-heeled sandals.



saulted by the priest at El Refugio, Jalisco, where she lived. Soon after she decided to find work as a waitress in several red-light districts because she always liked watching the dancers from close up, "but not so close that she'd get burnt." Norma's a mischievous, extroverted woman and know-it-all.

Amalia, 66, from Michoacán, came to Casa Xochiquetzal when it first opened its

doors. She wears a wig and pads her bra. She is joyful, words and songs coming easily to her. Amalia collects things, and though she's had schizophrenia for 22 years, she works hard not to lose touch with reality. Amalia helps out selling clothes in a stand that her 32-year-old boyfriend manages and also gathers plastic bottles for recycling as a way of earning a little money.



Lunch time for Luchita and others at Casa Xochiquetzal.



MODEST DREAMS

Their most valued possessions are safely in their memories. Maria Isabel collects poetry and writes, filling dozens of notebooks; Raquel fills bags with bottles she later sells. Margarita likes stuffed animals and wearing handbags made of raffia. Conchita embroiders as a way to let her imagination soar, and when Norma isn't



Making friends is easy in Casa Xochiquetzal. Margarita and Norma Angelica, both residents of Casa Xochiquetzal, sit in Norma Angelica's bedroom. Meanwhile, Canela takes a visiting dog on a walk. Originally from Oaxaca, she came to Mexico City to work at a very young age. Now well known and respected in the surrounding neighborhood, at 72, she suffers a number of illnesses and has Down's syndrome. And then, there's always the Bible for comfort.



And in the end there are the funerals.

sick, she visits San Fernando Park, “her office,” where lots of people know her.

Most women who live at Casa Xochiquetzal have relatives, though in a number of cases contact with them is sporadic or non-existent. None has ever considered an abortion, and at times they are quite religious. Some have even attended burials of those who once tyrannized and demeaned them. They give limitlessly and from the heart.

At this late stage of their lives, these women’s dreams are modest—to reconcile with their estranged children and spend the rest of their lives in peace.

And these are just a handful of the ladies of Casa Xochiquetzal. Theirs are stories of towering rage and boundless courage. In spite of it all, they don’t give up. They’re wise and funny; they have an active imagination and are nobody’s fools. ●

