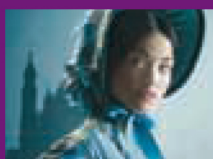




**SLUTWALKS:
CRITICAL MASS
ON THE STREETS**



**TEEN FICTION
TO EMPOWER
GIRLS**



**GAY
RIGHTS
IN UGANDA**

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BUY CANADIAN



RETIRED SEX WORKERS

A PHOTO ESSAY FROM MEXICO

**ARE WOMEN TOO
QUICK TO FORGIVE?**

**THE UNFAITHFUL
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Casa Xochiquetzal

PHOTOS BY BENEDICTE DESRUS
ARTICLE BY ANNUSKA ANGULO

Xochiquetzal (pronounced So-chi-ke-chal) is an Aztec goddess whose name means flower-feather. She represents the divine and spiritual side of the pleasures of the flesh. Xochiquetzal was adored by the *abuianime*, the pre-Hispanic prostitutes. Modern-day sex workers in Mexico need a goddess more than ever, and a unique project in Mexico City is helping the most forgotten sex workers—the elderly.

In the heart of Mexico City, surrounded by crumbling churches, plazas and palaces, is Casa Xochiquetzal, a civil association that provides shelter for elderly sex workers with help from private and public funds.

“It is the only shelter of its kind in all Latin America,” Rosalba Ríos, director of Casa Xochiquetzal, says proudly, “and maybe in the whole world.”

Here, they have a bed, three meals a day, medical care, bathrooms and most important, an identity—“in some cases, for the first time in their lives,” Ríos explains. Since she became director, Xochiquetzal has helped residents obtain credentials for social security and an age card that qualifies them for discounts on all kinds of services.

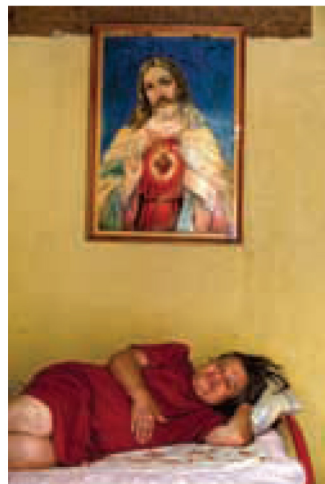
Casa Xochiquetzal is located in Tepito, a tough neighbourhood known for its boxing and wrestling champions. The patron saint here is the Santa Muerte (Saint Death herself) and the area also has one of the largest open-air brothels in Latin America. Some of the sex workers are still children while others are old enough to be grandmothers. Many are also victims of human trafficking. The building, formerly occupied by a museum of boxing, is very close to the same streets and plazas where its current residents have worked most of their lives.

To become old on those streets is a feat of endurance by itself. The women have terrifying stories and secrets that they don't like to talk about. Most of them have been working the streets since childhood and talking about the past is difficult. They don't trust people easily, and for good reason.



*Jimena in her room
at Casa Xochiquetzal
in May 2009.*

Clockwise (from top left): María, rests on her bed at Casa Xochiquetzal in September 2010; Canela, a resident of Casa Xochiquetzal, attempts to take a visiting dog for a walk; Residents pose for a photograph after a theatre workshop at Casa Xochiquetzal in November 2008.



Margarita in her bedroom at Casa Xochiquetzal in October 2010.



“In the streets, trust is a weakness,” explains Ríos, a psychotherapist with a special interest in vulnerable groups. “The most difficult challenge for them is learning how to live together. They have lived by themselves all their lives. But in a home like this, you need some basic rules of behaviour—and they don’t like rules.”

Nevertheless, photographer Benedicte Desrus has earned their trust. When she arrives at the house, all the women greet her—well, most of them. Some curse her and her camera, but with a smile. Desrus curses back at them with her French-accented Spanish. They are used to journalists, but they have never encountered one so committed to knowing their stories and capturing their lives. So they let her come into their rooms. Now, they trust her with their secrets, half-whispered here and there.

There are a lot of whispers at Xochiquetzal, secret alliances and secret enemies. The reason for the departure of the original director of the house, a prostitute named Carmen Muñoz, is one of those secrets.

Seven years have passed since the Xochiquetzal project officially started. High-profile feminist activists, actresses

and writers were all involved in launching the project. The house grew out of the ability of Muñoz to bridge the world of working prostitutes and high-profile organizations. When it started, between 30 and 40 women lived in the residence. Today there are about 20 residents.

I meet Muñoz at Café El Popular. Just shy of 60, she is a charismatic woman with an articulate way of talking. Across steaming coffees, she explains her version of the origins of Casa Xochiquetzal.

“I used to see old friends sleep on cardboard on the street, and it felt horrible,” Muñoz recalls. “I had been in the streets all my life. It occurred to me that we could make a house for the old ladies in an abandoned building. Maya Goded [a Mexican photographer] put me in touch with all these powerful women, and they got the house for us as a free loan. Then they funded my project with public money.”

Later, I learned that the project was first envisioned by Elvira Reyes Parra, a psychologist and civil activist and the author of *Gritos en el Silencio* (*Silenced Screams*, a book about human trafficking in the sex industry).

I asked Muñoz about rumours that she has cautioned some women not to stay at Casa Xochiquetzal. She denies this. I asked her why she thinks there are fewer women at the shelter than before. “Because Rosalba is not one of us,” Muñoz replies. “She can take the women out of Tepito, but she can’t take Tepito out of them.” This is true, but it’s also true that Tepito is becoming a part of Rosalba, bit by bit.

“Working here is very difficult sometimes, very complicated,” Ríos says after I tell her about my conversation with Muñoz, whom she says she admires. “She got sick and she left. I wish she would come back because she was a strong

street leader. I hear through the grapevine that she has been dissing the house and me.”

Back at the shelter, I ask Ríos whether Xochiquetzal is a lifetime project or a stage in her life. Without a doubt, she says she won’t stay forever. Apart from the job being dangerous (she’s received death threats) the work is difficult.

“My goal is to create a model that can be replicated in other cities in other countries,” Ríos says. “Many people don’t even realize there are old-aged sex workers. They are more invisible than child prostitutes. They also need a voice, and a dignified end of their lives. That’s what Xochiquetzal is.” ❀

Clockwise (from top left): Reyna sits in her room at Casa Xochiquetzal in May 2009; Lourdes in her room at Casa Xochiquetzal in February 2009; Staff members serve lunch to residents of Casa Xochiquetzal in 2008.

