



the women of casa xochiquetzal

french shutterbug *bénédicte desrus* has
been photographing retired sex workers
in mexico city for 10 years.

INTERVIEW MIA TIMPANO





Page 92, top: Marbella, 61, loves to write poetry. Bottom: Gloria, 84, shows an old picture with her boyfriend, Mau.

Page 94, top: Carmelita prepares lunch for the group. Bottom: Mariu visits her daughter in the city of Pachuca.

Page 95: Main courtyard at Casa Xochiquetzal.

Tell us about Casa Xochiquetzal. It's a shelter run by the local government for elderly sex workers. When it opened in 2006, prostitution was illegal in Mexico. Now it's legal in several states, but there are still problems with the police and bribes. Many women don't have IDs when they arrive, because they were abandoned or come from indigenous communities where they don't do certificates or papers, so they can't get help from the government, like medical services. The shelter gives them basic things: a roof, food, an ID, and medical and psychological care. Some women are schizophrenic, others are bipolar. They've had such harsh lives, and it can be intense to have people with so many psychological conditions in one place. It's nice to see their evolution over time, though. It's more mellow now.

How did you discover the place? I was asked to take some photos there for a story, and was like, "Wow." It's the only such shelter existing in Latin America. Before I visited, when I thought about prostitutes, I never thought about them when they were old. These vulnerable women are often invisible to society. I went home, but knew I wanted to go back there.

Run us through a typical day at Casa Xochiquetzal. The women have breakfast, then, depending on the day, they'll have activities or workshops, making bread, chocolates or arts and crafts. Some will go walking the neighbourhood to see friends; some will sell cigarettes or sweets on the street. Each day, a different woman will assist the cook at lunch and clean the kitchen. Then they'll go on the patio and talk. Some read in their rooms; one writes poetry. Canela likes to eat sweets, even though she has diabetes – she'll hide and eat sweets and watch TV. At night they like to watch melodramas. Then they go to sleep.

What challenges do the residents face? One thing that's really painful for them is not being in touch with their children. It's also a big challenge having them all together, because, even if they've known each other for 20 or 30 years, some are competitive, so they fight. When it's Christmas, they fight more,



because it's normally a time when you're with family – that's when they remember they are really alone.

How did the ladies feel about having their portraits taken?

By the time I arrived, they'd already had some bad experiences with photographers, who'd said, "We won't publish your photo," then done it anyway. Some women were publicly exposed and their families discovered they were sex workers. Two women were pretty aggressive with me. For the first six months, it was really hard. I'd knock on the door upon arriving at the shelter and one of them would say, "Oh, it's you," then lock the door in my face. Now when they do that, I make jokes.

Have you become friends with any of them over time? Definitely. I heard when you're a journalist, you have to set limits – you can't be friends with your subjects. But I disagree with that, because how can you spend 10 years with people and not have a relationship? I'm not friends with them in the sense that they come to my house, but when it's my birthday, I'll bring a cake. When my son was born, I took him there. They know my husband. They're like my grandmothers in Mexico.

What positive things have you witnessed at the shelter? If one of the women dies, all of them will attend the funeral. That way, they know that when they die, they won't be alone. One of their big fears is to die alone on the street and just be trash in a communal space. They also do workshops in arts and crafts, and sell some of what they create. Increasingly, I see them supporting each other. And they're very thankful to the shelter for having meals and medical care. It gives them a lot of peace.

What have the women of Casa Xochitetzal taught you? Tolerance. Don't judge. Use your humour, but with respect. Sometimes you can hurt someone with a joke. Understand their stories so you can understand them and what they went through. They're always positive, and will be like, "This happened, but you know what? I'm still here." They really live in the present. ✨

Page 96: Norma Angelica, 54, twirls a hula hoop.

Page 97, top: Sonia, 67, in her bedroom. Bottom: Portrait of Luchita at the shelter.

