

THE WOMEN OF CASA XOCHIQUETZAL

Photographs by Bénédicte Desrus

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What happens to sex workers when they get old?

For ten years, I documented the day-to-day lives of the women living at Casa Xochiquetzal, a unique shelter for elderly sex workers in Mexico City.

In downtown Mexico City, elderly women offer sex in exchange for a few pesos or a bit to eat, they live in appalling conditions on the street. Ostracised by society, often rejected by their families and with no place to spend their final years, they are forced to continue to practise their profession.

To most of us they are invisible.

But hope for a better life is beginning to crystallise. The local government has donated a building, located in one of the poorest and most marginalized neighborhoods in Mexico City, to house these elderly sex workers - and also provides daily meals and utilities for the home.

The house, named Xochiquetzal after the Aztec goddess of the earth and love, came into being - in 2006 - thanks to Carmen Muñoz, a sex worker herself, with the help of prominent female artists and feminist groups.

The unique project seeks to spur action to improve the living conditions of elderly sex workers.

It is the only such shelter existing in Latin America.

The shelter gives older and independent sex workers the space and opportunity to gain dignity and learn about their human rights. It also offers its residents medical and psychiatric care, education and handicrafts training and courses to help them rediscover their self-confidence and deal with traumatic aspects of their lives.

The only condition is that they be over 55 years old and abide by a set of basic rules. Some continue to work in the sex trade, and some not. They are all encouraged to set up small businesses.

The shelter gives the women a dignified way out of their profession.

BIOGRAPHY:

[Bénédicte Desrus](#) (France, 1976) is an award-winning documentary photographer based in Mexico City. She is distributed by [Sipa Press USA](#) and has worked throughout Europe, East Africa, the United States and Latin America.

She focuses on humanitarian and social issues around the world. Her photography explores the lives of people ostracized by society, and the communities they form to survive and find respect. She often spends months with her subjects. Recent stories explored the lives of elderly sex workers living in a shelter in Mexico City, Prader-Willy syndrome in Mexico, Donovan Tavera - Mexico's only government-certified forensic cleaner, the anti-gay bill & persecution of homosexuality in Uganda, the albinos killing in Tanzania and global obesity.

An archive of all publications located here: www.benedictedesrus.contently.com

She co-authored the book "Las amorosas más bravas" ("Tough Love"). The eight-year-long project documents the lives of the women living in the Casa Xochiquetzal, a shelter for elderly sex workers in Mexico City.

She has earned numerous awards and distinctions including:

- 2019 Addis Foto Fest (Ethiopia)
- 2018 Indian Photography Festival – Hyderabad (India)
- 2016 Pride Photo Award (The Netherlands)
- 2016 SoPhot Photo contest (France)
- 2015 Syngenta Photography Award (Exhibition Scarcity-Waste at Somerset House in London)
- 2014 Moscow International Photo Awards
- 2013 China's Humanity Photo Awards
- 2013 REVELA - II International Photography Award for the Social Rights Holders (Spain)
- 2012 Mexico Contemporary Photography Contest - Coahuila's Mexican Foundation of Cinema and Arts
- 2012 New York Photo Awards
- 2012 International Photography Awards (USA)
- 2012 NPPA's Best of Photojournalism
- 2012 OPEN Photo - Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa
- 2012 PDN Photo Annual
- 2012 New York Photo Festival
- 2012 Kuala Lumpur International Photo Awards
- 2011 Pride Photo Award (The Netherlands)
- 2011 China's Humanity Photo Awards
- 2011 XIV Luis Valtueña International Humanitarian Photography (Exhibition / Spain)
- 2011 Open Society Institute - Moving Walls 18 (USA)