



Cheryl Ware

Untold Intimacies

A History of
Sex Work in Aotearoa,
1978–2008

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Introduction

In February 2004, Dani was thirty-one and had spent the previous fifteen years working in various corporate roles in Auckland. She had considered starting sex work several times, and ‘the opportunity kind of presented itself’. She was single for the first time in several years, ‘which is the only way I would have chosen to start’, and needed a change. She was ready to ‘give it a go’. Dani explained:

I had been given a verbal warning at my work for something that I didn’t think was that major. And I basically threw my toys out of the cot [laughs]. I’d been working in HR for many years, and I didn’t think it was warranted and I marched out. . . . So, I was looking in the paper for advertisements for work, and as I was looking through these HR or secretarial roles, I saw all these advertisements that said ‘Ladies, ladies, ladies!’ And I thought, Ooh [clasps hands], how cool would that be! Given that I had stormed out of my work for the first time in my life, and that I had thought about it for many years. I thought, Oh my gosh, *imagine*.

Dani’s final push into the sex industry came the very next morning. She completed an interview for a secretarial position but found the process ‘very degrading because I’d been recruiting some pretty high-level people for massive projects. And suddenly I was doing grammar and typing tests.’ Feeling disillusioned with the prospect of ‘going back to the start’, she drove home via a large massage parlour in central Auckland:

I decided to go past a place called Femme Fatale and I thought, Well, I know where it is, and there's usually two car parks directly underneath that the management park in. I thought, I'll drive past, and if there's a car park available, then I'll drive in, and I'll walk in and see what the deal is. And if there are no car parks available, then that option's not an option. Anyway, I drove through and both car parks were available.

Still dressed in her conservative interview attire, Dani entered the parlour, met the manager, and was invited to start work the next day. She recalled, 'I loved it. Absolutely loved it. And I've never looked back.' Dani had found her calling. She concluded: 'I've definitely found what I want to do. And I essentially chose it as a career.'

Dani's introduction to the sex industry was not without issues. Despite parlour operators being legally required to provide sexual health information to their employees, she did not receive any advice about using condoms or other safe sex products. She was simply given a quick tour of the bar, shown her locker, and then 'you are left entirely to your own devices'. The issues caused by the lack of an orientation perhaps paled in comparison to the prejudice Dani faced as a sex worker. Open about her work from the outset, she remembered that the hardest part was 'opening up to my family. I did, and they didn't react very well.' Dani was ostracised by her 'very Catholic' parents, siblings, and extended family for nearly a decade. She was also careful to protect her child from others' potentially negative reactions to her new job. She explained: 'The only place I did create an illusion was for my son's school, I never wanted that to impact on my son's life. So, I told the school that I still worked as a contractor, and that was never questioned.'

Eight months earlier, in June 2003, New Zealand had become the first country to decriminalise soliciting, brothel-keeping and living off the earnings of sex work on a national level with the Prostitution Reform Act. The law change recognised sex work as work. It propelled New Zealand's sex industry onto the international stage. Human rights organisations, including Amnesty International and the United Nations, lauded the 'New Zealand model' whereby sex work is decriminalised and workers are protected under employment legislation.

The ability of people like Dani to work without the risk of being arrested is a testament to the achievements of those who dedicated themselves to protecting sex workers' rights and safety. In the decades leading up to law

reform, sex workers fought to survive in an industry that was criminalised and pushed to the margins of society. They rejected claims that sex work was wrong and asserted themselves as informed and responsible citizens engaged in a legitimate profession. In recent years, social scientists and public health researchers have taken the lead in exploring the development of sex work activism in Aotearoa.¹ The intimate lived experiences of the individuals directly responsible for and affected by New Zealand's pioneering sex work legislation have received less attention. These individuals are at the heart of this book.

Drawing on new and archived interviews, *Untold Intimacies* focuses primarily on the critical years from the regulation of brothels with the Massage Parlours Act of 1978 to the legally mandated national review of decriminalisation by the Prostitution Law Review Committee in 2008. The late twentieth century witnessed increasingly open discussions about sex and sexuality following the more liberal 1960s, the increasing availability of the contraceptive pill, and the social movements of that era. These movements, most notably women's liberation and the gay rights movement, disrupted the 'happy families façade' of postwar New Zealand, and brought attention to the double standard of laws that criminalised sex workers but not their predominantly male clientele.² Through the narrators' voices, this book reveals both the increasing visibility and unity of a national network of sex workers and the tensions that emerged as sex workers fought for financial, physical and emotional safety during an era of social and political upheaval. It sheds new light on how public international debates about decriminalisation, challenging stigma and protecting sex workers' human rights resonated with some of the individuals at the centre of these discussions.

The following chapters invite readers into the intimate lives of twenty-five individuals who started sex work inadvertently, to meet short-term financial or personal goals, or as a career that sometimes spanned several decades. They worked in massage parlours, from the streets, on the ships, as escorts, and as private operators from their homes or separate apartments while advertising their services in local newspapers. Most interviewees worked in more than one of these settings, each of which offered varying levels of independence, flexibility, community and earning potential. The oral histories reveal how these individuals made a living at a time when most elements of sex work were outlawed, and an arrest could be financially devastating and socially ruinous. They offer first-hand accounts of how workers negotiated their relationships with peers, employers, clients, police, and the wider public.