

Untold Intimacies: A History of Sex Work in Aotearoa 1978-2008.

By Cheryl Ware.

Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2025.

RRP: \$39.99, ISBN: 9781776711406.

Reviewed by Violet Blue

Stout Research Centre for NZ Studies

Through rigorous research, extensive interviews, and investigative reporting, *Untold Intimacies* exists as a vitally important document demonstrating that when sex work is made safely legal, society does not, in fact, unravel. It's a rare look at an aspect of history seldom documented with unvarnished first-person perspectives, and each of the twenty-five individuals here provides invaluable insight into sex work inside and outside the law, policing and safety, health and well-being. Notably, the lived experiences documented across the book's eight chapters depict a powerful human rights struggle that remains a flashpoint as bodily autonomy and sexual agency is being violently stripped from populations today, now, in the world and at home.

Widely misunderstood, mischaracterised, demonised, weaponised, glamourised, and leveraged for profit from every angle (including 'rescue' profiteers), few professions have been so polarising, so talked about. And none could be so easily demystified by anyone willing to simply talk to sex workers and find out why they make the choices they do – and how it's working out for them. That's exactly what *Untold Intimacies: A History of Sex Work in Aotearoa 1978-2008* by Cheryl Ware aimed for. The book exceeded expectations in doing so by revealing a never-before-seen world where sex workers of all genders and orientations engage in a globally unique setting of legal, safe, normalised, and supportive structures.

Untold Intimacies sets the scene in 'Chapter One: Outside the Law' with a bleak tableau; first-person accounts and historical records of just how dangerous and violent Aotearoa's sex industry was under anti-sex work legislation, prior to 2003. Sex work in Western society was largely characterised by 'anything goes' violence, racism, and abuse from police and clientele, who were held to no standards of accountability or legal restraint. In this, Aotearoa was no outlier.

In *Untold Intimacies*, the violence and racism experienced by sex workers of the pre-decriminalisation era are presented in concrete, not abstract terms. Sex workers in early 2000s Christchurch parlours describe Rape Crisis helping them to report sexual assault to the police, only to be met with hostility and dismissal by detectives. Massage parlour workers in 1980s Wellington recount police stalking and outing them. Police brutality and abuse was the norm from Auckland on down, as well as no recourse for sexual assault. This was particularly true for Māori and Pasifika individuals, trans, whakawāhine, fa'afafine, and gay male workers who were singled out, and also punished under additional crimes until 1986 when homosexuality was legalised.

By the closing pages of *Untold Intimacies*, readers learn that the impact of decriminalisation 'is perhaps most evident in the transformed relationships between sex workers and police' (p. 194). Ware describes how, in October 2022, the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC) and the New Zealand Police collaborated to produce a guide for sex workers who have been sexually assaulted. Anyone up to date with current headlines regarding New Zealand Police and sexual

(mis)conduct, as well as far right attacks on bodily autonomy, knows there's still a long road ahead. Yet the stark contrasts seen in *Untold Intimacies* pre- and post-decriminalisation are indisputable.

In chapters about mentors, bodily autonomy, and community building, *Untold Intimacies* documents how the majority of Aotearoa's sex workers formed protective care circles, got organised, and fought for equal rights against a backdrop of workers organising in Australia, England, France, and the United States. Sparked by San Francisco's COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), and the Compton's Cafeteria riot, as well as New York's Stonewall riots, Aotearoa's sex workers found their flashpoint in the urgency to protect their communities from HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s – by becoming key participants in leading the national response. Numerous watershed moments included the establishment of NZPC drop-in centres nationwide backed by Department of Health funding to provide subsidised safer sex gear, health checks, testing, and more. Another key moment was the 1988 launch of NZPC's national magazine SIREN: Sex Industry Rights Educational Network. In yet another, 'Chapter Seven: Fighting for Decriminalisation', we learn the Women's Christian Temperance Union, along with other conservative groups, also backed decriminalisation as a 'challenge to sexism' (p. 150).

At the heart of this book is the concept of sexual consent. Its centrepiece, certainly for our time now, is *Untold Intimacies*' foundational belief that taking the word 'no' seriously when it comes to adult consensual sexual activity – that a person's 'no' should mean 'no' – can't exist in a vacuum where they cannot equally say 'yes' and have that taken seriously, too. This is the crux of consent, and the argument underpinning sex work's direct challenge to antiquated notions that adults – particularly adult women – cannot inherently be allowed or entrusted with their own ability to meaningfully give or revoke sexual consent. For many in *Untold Intimacies*, reclaiming agency over their bodies and sexuality had been felt concretely when empowered to say 'no' to clients (meaningfully, and with post-decriminalisation consequences), and for their 'yes' to be something given freely (or not under pressure), rather than sex existing as something for others to take from them.

The whole of *Untold Intimacies* is essential reading for anyone interested in human rights, sexual history, Māori and Pasifika discrimination (and the stigmatised bodily autonomy of those populations), and understanding what life is really like for sex workers across decades of changing history. As *Untold Intimacies* makes clear, one of the more powerful values of decriminalisation is finally having facts in both data and experiences about sex work – not imagined or invented numbers or the graphically nightmarish stories behind what we were told by anti-sex work campaigners before decriminalisation introduced transparency. Further, decriminalisation provided workers with the evidence and standing to refute 'damaged' character attacks for simply choosing a job that some may find distasteful or upsetting. 'Sex work is work', any member of the profession will tell you – it's a job like any other, and per the detailed, rigorously researched accounts here, it's more like seventy per cent counselling, twenty per cent sex, and ten per cent admin.

At points when the prose becomes dry, the firsthand accounts shared in this book, set against a global struggle for sex worker rights and Aotearoa's changing political landscapes, illuminate the pages and fill the book with bold retellings of previously hidden points of history. *Untold*

Intimacies is a powerful, inspiring story of unity, challenging discrimination, and a diverse population leveraging the strengths of inclusion to demand equal humanity and rights in the eyes and laws of society.

Aotearoa's sex workers refuted typical notions about New Zealand's isolation, and when presented with the brass ring of a global human rights movement for sex workers, they grabbed it. Aotearoa New Zealand was the first country to decriminalise sex work – and *Untold Intimacies* proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that it has been an overwhelming success. It's a book for our time: unflinching, political, fact-based, and empowering.