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There are many slang terms for full-service sex workers, but one of my favorites is “working girl.” I cannot be completely sure when I first heard it, but I knew it in passing before I began sex work in the early 2010s in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Once I was working, it likely popped up from one of the more experienced working girls in a dressing room. When I talk to civilians about the sex industry, I will usually say that I do “sex work” and discuss the figure of the “sex worker.” I am conscious of how the jaunty informality of “working girl” might not be the most helpful term for conveying more serious messaging. It is anachronistic, almost deliberately so, and it both is and isn’t a euphemism. Instead, it feels more like shop talk. Sometimes I might shorten working girl to “working.” I will casually speak of “when I started working” or ask a friend “have you been working much recently?” when I am confident that all parties in the conversation know what kind of work I mean.

Typically, when clients use this term, they refer to someone they knew personally who worked (“my ex-wife was a working girl,” “one of my cousins used to be a working girl back in the day”). Although it includes the diminutive “girls,” the force of this reference feels mitigated by the fact it is paired with an acknowledgement that our work is work. My fondness for the term is perhaps also unusual because although I have been a working girl for a decade, I am nonbinary, and definitively not a girl myself.

The term working girl appears in various oral histories and in academic research from New Zealand, Canada, and Australia and elsewhere. Ross notes it was one of an interchangeable list of self-descriptors used in interviews with sex workers who worked in

Vancouver’s West End through the 1970s and 1980s.¹ Working girl is also commonly used in news media coverage. Unlike other slang terms related to the sex industry appearing in the media – “Johns” or “tricks,” for example – working girl is a term which actual working girls sometimes use.

The working girl stands in contrast to what Mac and Smith have termed the “erotic professional.”² They use this term to describe the sector of the industry who frame their work through lenses of sex positivity and empowerment. This persona appears in a sex worker’s marketing as an authentic representation of their feelings about their work, foregrounding erotic desire and passion, while foreclosing any meaningful discussion of material conditions. The erotic professional seeks to position their engagement with sex work as autonomous and professional, eliding the forms of social and economic privilege which enable this, most notably the economic security that enable sex workers to comfortably decline clients on the basis of sexual compatibility, not just safety. This framing often casts sex work as analogous to personal and private sexual relationships. The erotic professional tries to distance themselves from the history of the industry as well as the long-term project of sex worker activists to explain the industry as a type of work, not a type of sexual behavior. By contrast, the typical usage of working girl recalls continuities in the trade and is pragmatic, neutral, and business-like.

My experience as a sex worker and academic researcher has been shaped by working under Aotearoa’s model of decriminalization. The Prostitution Reform Act 2003 decriminalized indoor and street-based sex work for most people aged 18 and over (migrant sex workers are still excluded from its protections). Mac and Smith identify the erotic professional in discourses from locations where sex work is still criminalized, but this figure exists under decriminalization too. Elsewhere, I have argued that decriminalization has not resulted in a uniform rolling back of stigma, but rather an unequal apportioning of it.³ The most

acceptable sex workers are typically those who present a public face of authentic pleasure and empowerment. I like the term working girl because it feels rooted in a history of sex work that pre-dates the erotic professional as well as the more recent conspicuous attempts to upscale and mainstream sex workplaces – which are especially marked following decriminalization.⁴ This mainstreaming recasts some workers as authentically engaged with their jobs, doing sex work as a profitable hobby or passion project, rather than performing labor to earn a living. Erotic professional is implicitly a classed position, and so too is working girl – with working girls located squarely in the working class.

The acceptable sex worker derives their status through a comparison to what they are not, the unacceptable Other. I appreciate working girl for how it pushes back against this division, locating contemporary sex work within a much longer history. It takes one core tenet of the sex worker rights movement - that sex work is work - and incorporates it into the descriptor. Saying I am a working girl establishes the register in which I will discuss my work: pragmatic, not erotic. It is not making any particular claims about my feelings towards my job, but it notes pointedly that what I do with clients is work.

¹ Ross, “Outdoor Brothel Culture,” 143.

² Mac and Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes*.

³ Easterbrook-Smith, *Producing the Acceptable Sex Worker*.

⁴ Brents and Sanders, “Mainstreaming the Sex Industry.”

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