

Published July 10th, 2019

A bitter subject at Sweet Thursdays author talk

By Garrett Leahy



Julia Flynn Siler, Author

The topic at June's Sweet Thursdays author talk at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center was anything but sweet. New York Times bestselling author and Wall Street Journal former staff writer and currently contributor Julia Flynn Siler discussed her new book, "The White Devil's Daughters," which chronicles the stories of several young Chinese women sold as sex slaves in San Francisco's Chinatown throughout the 19th century, including after the abolition of slavery.

These women escaped their owners and sought refuge at the Occidental Mission Home on 920 Sacramento Street, which served as a sanctuary for trafficked Chinese women forced into prostitution. There, the mission home's superintendent, Donaldina "Dolly" Cameron, a Scottish immigrant, and her assistant and Cantonese interpreter, Tien Fuh Wu, would care for between 50 and 60 girls behind barred windows and brick walls, keeping their former masters from reclaiming their human property, with Cameron's success earning her the moniker "White Devil" by the slavers.

Siler's book is a shocking account of a dark aspect of San Francisco's past, where Chinese young women, averaging between the ages of 8 and 14 years of age and sold by their families in China, were sold again as prostitutes, only to be left on the streets to die of disease as soon as four years after their sale.

For Siler, "The White Devil's Daughters" is about the friendship between Cameron and Wu, who despite coming from vastly different backgrounds, one a well-to-do Scottish missionary, and the other a victim of sex trafficking, ended up depending on each other to run the home, ultimately to be buried in the same family plot in Evergreen Cemetery.

Siler closed the event with what she believes we should take away from her book: the desire to help others in need, to treat immigrants with dignity, and to support women. "Stepping back, this book is about how we treat immigrants, it's a book about radical empathy and that moment that people take the leap to care for the other in their communities - the same kind of empathy that fueled the abolitionists, [and] an inspiring story about women helping other women," she said.

Siler's book chronicles the Occidental Mission Home's operation from 1874 until the 1930s, but the subject of the book continues to have relevance today. Over 5,400 human trafficking cases nationwide were reported in 2018 to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, a 24-hour hotline for victims of human trafficking or those concerned to report cases and tips about cases of human trafficking, while 1,758 calls about human trafficking and 760 human trafficking cases in California were reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline during the first seven months of 2018.

HEAT Watch, an award-winning program run by the Alameda County District Attorney's Office, states that California has more human trafficking victims than any other state in the U.S. and describes the San Francisco Bay Area as a "hotspot" for human trafficking. The median age for trafficked girls is between 12 and 14 and the median age for trafficked boys and transgender youth is between 11 and 13, according to HEAT Watch.

Although these statistics can demonstrate the scope of the issue of human trafficking, some warn that they may underestimate the number of victims and who they are.

Dr. Kimberly Chang, a physician and anti-trafficking activist at Asian Health Services, an Oakland-based clinic founded in 1974 whose mission is providing "health, social, and advocacy services for all regardless of income, insurance status, immigration status, language, or culture," explained the issues with reliance on statistics.

"It's really only the tip of the iceberg that gets counted," said Chang in a phone interview. "It's an underground thing. They [victims of trafficking] can be boys, girls, men, women. You don't need to be moved across borders to be trafficked," added Chang, referring to the two definitions of human trafficking under Section 103 of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000.

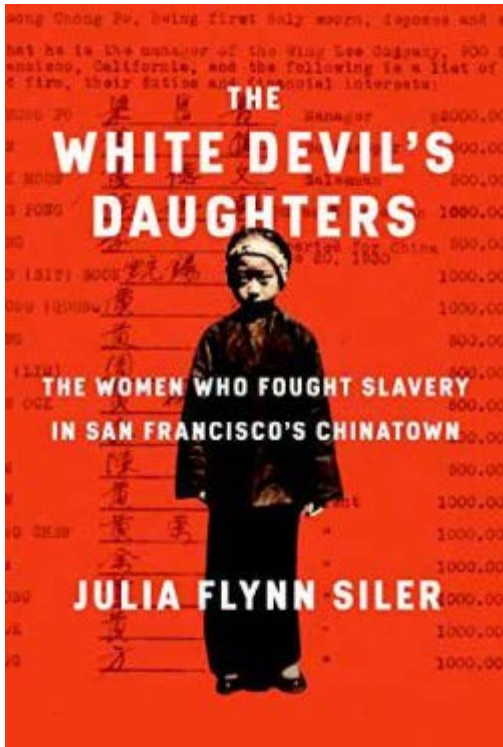
HEAT Watch also acknowledges the difficulties of acquiring reliable statistics, part of the reason being that human trafficking can also intersect with other types of sexual assault, including domestic violence, make it harder to clearly identify trafficking victims.

Living in an area where human trafficking is particularly widespread makes "The White Devil's Daughters" by Julia Flynn Siler a compelling book to read. Siler narrates a dark moment in the history of San Francisco and reminds us of the importance to take a brave step to help those in need in our communities.

If you or someone you know is a victim of human trafficking, contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or text "BeFree" to 233733. If you want to make an anonymous report, call the

HEAT Watch Tip Line: (510) 208-4959. If you want to support the fight against human trafficking, you can donate to the Polaris Project, an anti-human trafficking organization which operates the National Human Trafficking Hotline, at <https://polarisproject.org>.

For information about the next author discussion at LLLC, visit www.lllcf.org.



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