



Book review: **Doorways: Women, homelessness, trauma and resistance** Bekki Perriman, 2019

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Abstract

Doorways centers on the gendered aspects of homelessness through first hand anecdotes while also drawing on the broader aspects of the "housing crisis" and the failures of various homelessness support systems. The book also shares both harsh anecdotes of sexual abuse and harassment, as well as more hopeful accounts of solidarity among homeless women.

Keywords

homelessness, gender, resistance, home

Doorways began as a photography project by the author, Bekki Perriman, exploring and telling the stories of the different spaces where she slept whilst homeless. Perriman received a grant for an extended sound installation exhibition where she interviewed street homeless people and then broadcasted their own words in doorways across cities where audiences were invited to listen first hand to the stories of those who are so often ignored. The third stage of the project is *Doorways: women, homelessness, trauma and resistance*, an edited collection of essays and experiences, with an analysis placed next to each interview and photograph, offering a multifaceted and immersive approach to understanding the realities of street homelessness for women.

The gendered aspect of street homelessness has only recently started to be explored, and a project that specifically amplifies the reflections and voices of those who experience street homelessness is an even rarer phenomenon. By weaving first hand anecdotes and images of the sites of street homelessness, evocatively titled 'Where I slept last night', the



analyses included are not granted the option of cynical detachment from the everyday reality of life on the streets for women. The different essays and articles included draw on various aspects of the ‘housing crisis’ and its effect on women, from broad-sweeping analyses of neoliberalism, to discussions on the role that art can play in resistance and political struggles. However, the most touching and anger-inducing elements of the book come from the interviews with both former and currently homeless women.

These interviews do not function as your regular sob story. By allowing the women to speak in their own words they open a door to the complexity of street homeless that is often under-acknowledged by do-gooders and bleeding hearts. Anecdotes of sexual abuse, harassment by passers-by, and drug use are alongside and intertwined with accounts of solidarity between homeless people, women who take young girls under their wing, kindly station workers who offer a place to sleep to a vulnerable young woman. However, these narratives of kindness never offer an opportunity to dismiss street homeless people as one simple message rings out from all the stories: we didn’t choose this. *I didn’t choose this.*

Some of the most powerful stories within the text deal explicitly with the failure of the systems of homelessness provision, mental health provision, benefits, and domestic abuse services in catering for vulnerable people. ‘Not in priority need’ is a devastating piece of writing which details one young woman’s experience of years of being passed through different agencies and services as she is repeatedly deemed not vulnerable enough or, paradoxically, *too* vulnerable for various different provisions, while her mental health concurrently deteriorated, eventually leading to her being sectioned. It demonstrates the utter failure of our system to take care of the most vulnerable and the problems with arbitrary criterion for eligibility for assistance. These gaps in the system are enormous and so many vulnerable people are swept under the rug as their situation worsens until they, and we, are led to believe that it is somehow ‘their fault’.

While *Doorways* deals explicitly with gender and homelessness there is room to relate it to broader issues surrounding gender and the housing crisis. The Women’s Budget Group 2019 annual report: *A Home of Her Own* illustrates why it is vital to talk about the housing crisis through a gendered lens at every point¹. This is relevant because one does not simply become homeless; there are a million reasons why someone may end up on the street and gendered issues such as domestic violence and benefits play into it every step of the way. For example, cuts to housing benefit predominantly affect women as women make up 60% of housing benefit claimants. This in turn is reflected in the broader problems with the Universal Credit system, leaving many women without income for weeks while their UC is pending. Tenants on Universal Credit are six times more likely to fall behind on rent than those on other benefits. Further, there is not a single region in England where a private rented home is affordable on a median woman’s income, whereas there is no area outside of London where this is also the case for men. If you add this to issues such as domestic violence victims predominantly being women and the fact that a decade of cuts has led to one in five women being turned away from refuges due to lack of space, then it is no wonder

¹ All statistics in this paragraph are drawn from *A Home of Her Own: Women and Housing report*, Sara Reis, Women’s Budget Group, 2019.

that while the majority of rough sleepers are male, the majority (67%) of *statutory homeless* people are women. There is a severe shortage of accommodation and services for women with complex needs, from mental health to addiction, to former prisoners, which often leads to people being overlooked or left to go back to the streets. Thus, from private rent through to the street, the housing crisis is an explicitly gendered field and the ramifications of falling through the cracks often affect women differently to men.

However, despite the dire state of housing and care provisions in the UK, *Doorways* also seeks to draw attention to services and organisations that *do* put women's needs first and centre their varied and complex experiences. *Street Talk* and *Housing First* are two of the initiatives that are featured in the text as providing a more holistic approach to housing provision than the clinical, "priority need" based schemas employed by local authorities and many larger care and housing organisations. They both offer a client-centred and specific approach to dealing with multiple and complex issues, recognizing the centrality of safe housing to mental and physical health and wellbeing and longer-term stability.

'Home? What does home look like and what does home mean?'

This is how Bekki Perriman begins the afterward to *Doorways*. It is a question I think about a lot, in my work and everyday life. When does a house become a home? There are many answers and they tie to intangible feelings such as safety, comfort, ordinariness, contentment. Often the process of turning a house into a home takes a long time and involves bringing down walls you may have put up to protect yourself from the devastation wrought by eviction, by being displaced, by *losing* your home. It is safer perhaps to never try to make a house a home. But bit by bit, given time, given a house that you don't fear will be immediately taken from you, you might find yourself putting up posters, repainting the stairwell, buying furniture, *believing* that maybe this is yours and that you have a right to be there. A home means different things to different people. But as *Doorways*, its writers, contributors, and interviewees illustrate: everyone needs, and deserves, a home.