Finding Medieval Women in School Assessments: An interim report on GCSE and A-Level assessment papers in England 2022-2023.

Natasha Hodgson and Catherine Gower[1]

Published: 20 November 2024

Summary

An interim report on History GCSE and A Level exam papers that contain medieval topics issued by English exam boards, AQA, Edexcel and OCR, for the 2022 and 2023 examination years reveals critical limitations in the representation of women in KS4 and KS5 assessments. Students were directed to discuss women in their answers for only **2%** of questions, whereas they were directed to discuss men in **40%** of questions. Out of 164 instances of individuals named in questions across both years, **5 were women and 159 were men**. This imbalance extends beyond how questions are written but is evident also in accompanying source extracts and mark schema. Women were included in the mark schemes as possible answers for **23%** of questions, whereas men were included as possible answers for **81%** of questions. Female academics were overlooked with **only 1 out of 44 named historians being a woman**. As teachers prioritise routes to assessment success in their teaching and preparing their students for exams, a reform of assessments is essential to ensure that a more representative and inclusive History is being taught in schools. This report sets out a series of recommendations to improve the visibility of women in the current medieval history provision at GCSE and A Level.

Introduction

In preparation for the forthcoming school curriculum review, the Teaching Medieval Women group has been working alongside teachers in a series of continuing professional development sessions to identify and tackle challenges to the inclusion of women in the

---

[1] This research was conducted on behalf of Teaching Medieval Women and funded by Nottingham Trent University.
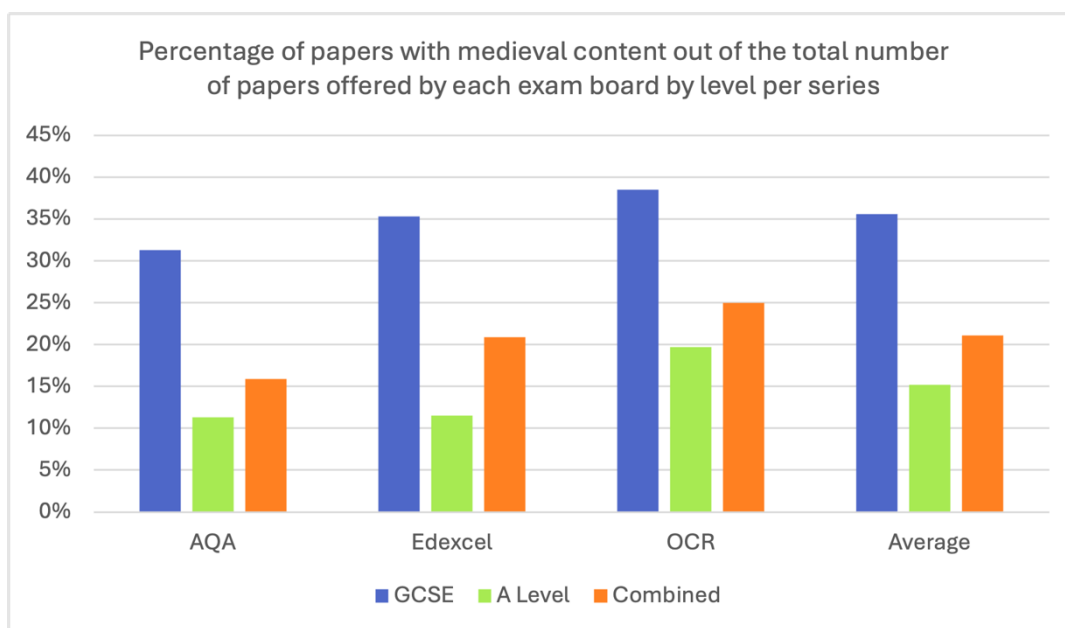
teaching of history in UK schools, especially in premodern topics. Assessment was identified as a key hurdle – while teachers often had expertise and willingness to include women in teaching, they found the curriculum and topics were too restrictive to allow them to devote attention either to individual women, or to topics relating to women. Conversely, male individuals still featured heavily. Simply put, they found that the gender imbalance in assessments significantly affected the opportunities they had to engage students with women's activities and experiences in the past. Pre-modern history (medieval and early modern) was a particularly challenging area in this respect.

The current survey was commissioned to examine the inclusion of women in GCSE and A Level History assessments relating to medieval history from across the 3 main exam boards of England: AQA, Edexcel, and OCR. As medieval topics are often embedded in wider breadth studies, all the questions from these papers were included in the dataset, though some might not refer explicitly to medieval content.[2] The survey involved analysis of 86 exam papers in total (43 from the June 2022 series and 43 from June 2023 – see Appendix B for full list). Each exam series contained 204 papers overall with papers containing medieval content making up 21.1% of the total number. In order to give a sense of scale for the survey, papers featuring medieval content comprised 35.6% of the total papers offered at GCSE, but only 15.2% of papers offered at A-Level. Across both levels and series, OCR offered the highest proportion of papers with medieval content (25%), while AQA offered the least (15.9%).[3]

---

[2] The survey comprised of papers which contained medieval content, including GCSE British History breadth studies which included questions focused on early modern and modern subjects. These questions were included as part of the survey. The criteria and process are discussed more fully in Appendix A.

[3] Appendix C, Table 1.

Teaching Medieval Women

Percentage of papers with medieval content out of the total number of papers offered by each exam board by level per series
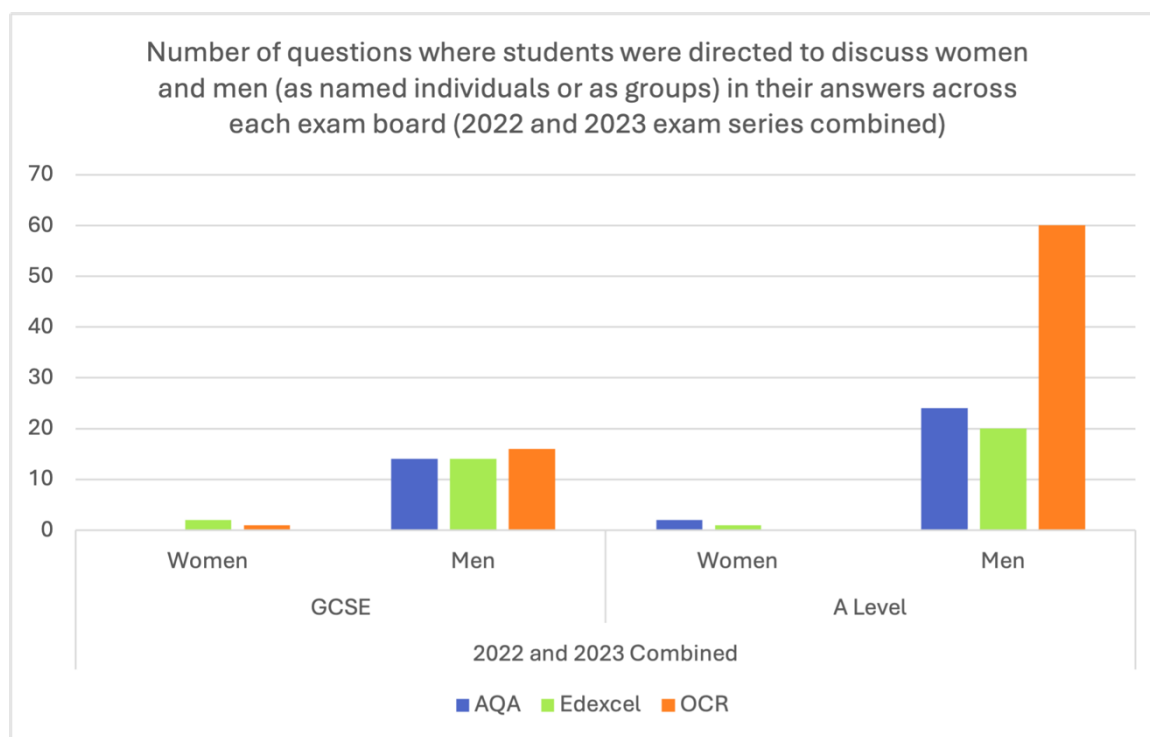
Women in exam questions

Out of 187 questions for medieval topics (and breadth study topics including medieval content) that were in the 2022 series, students were directed to discuss women, either as a gender-specific group or as named individuals, in only 3 questions (1.6%).[4] In the same dataset, students were directed to discuss men (either as a gender-specific group or as named individuals) in 79 out of 187 questions (42.2%). In the 2023 series, students were directed to discuss women in only 3 out of 187 questions (1.6%). For the same series, students were directed to discuss men in 69 questions (36.9%). The exam board with the highest number of questions on women across both series was Edexcel with 3 questions, followed by AQA (2 questions) and OCR (1 question). OCR had the highest number of questions on men (76), then AQA (38), and Edexcel (34).[5]

---

[4] Appendix D for questions. For numbers of questions, see Appendix C, Table 3a.
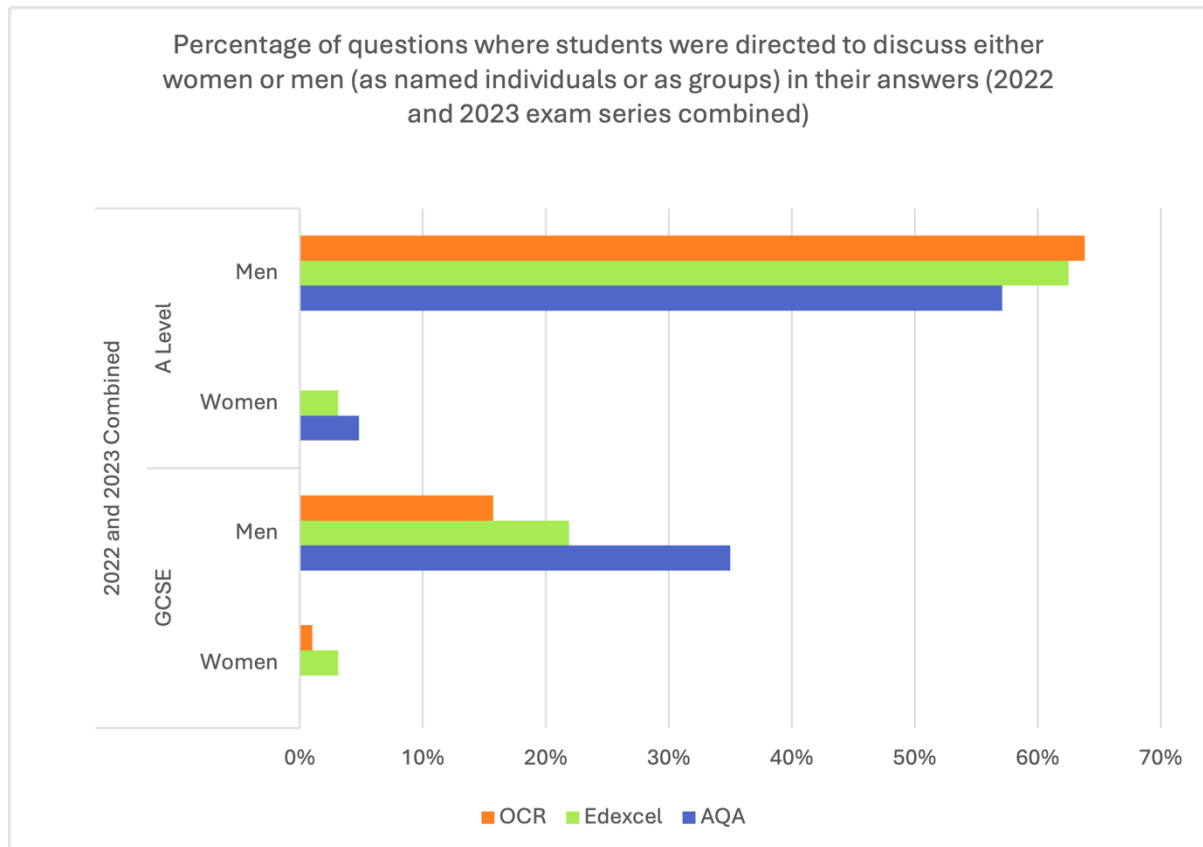
[5] Appendix C, Table 3a.

Number of questions where students were directed to discuss women and men (as named individuals or as groups) in their answers across each exam board (2022 and 2023 exam series combined)

Each exam board varied on the number of papers with medieval content they offered at different levels so in the interests of parity we represented these as percentages, counting how many questions focused on women, and how many on men, out of the total number of possible questions for each level and exam board.[6] Combining both 2022 and 2023 series, students were directed to discuss women in their answers at GCSE on average in 1.4% of questions. The board with the highest proportion of questions on women at GCSE was Edexcel (3.1%) and the lowest was AQA (0%). Meanwhile, students at GCSE for both years were directed to discuss men in their answers in 24.2% of questions on average, with AQA having the highest proportion of questions on men (35%) and OCR the lowest (15.7%). At A Level, for both years, students were directed to discuss women in their answers for 2.6% of questions on average, with AQA offering the highest proportion of questions on women (4.8%) and OCR the lowest (0%). Students were instead directed to discuss men in their answers at A Level for 61.1% of questions on
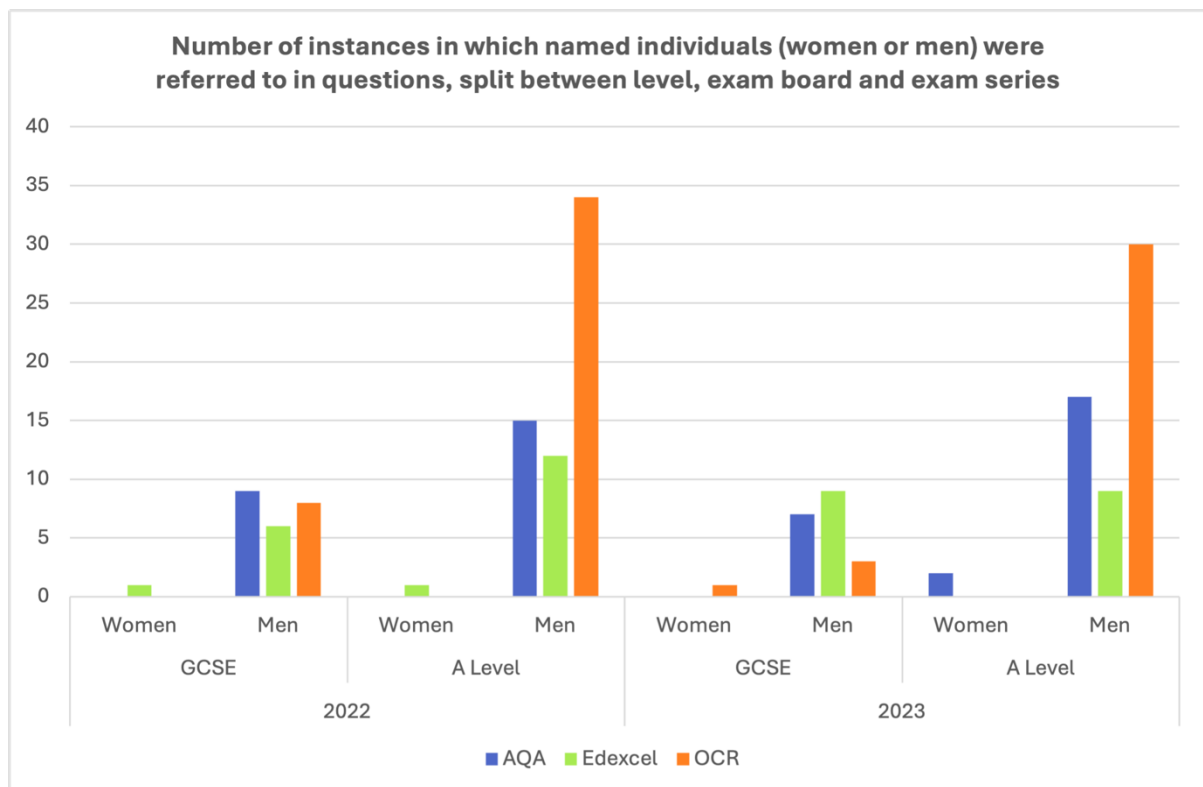
---

[6] Appendix C, Table 3b.

average, with OCR having the highest proportion of questions on men (63.8%) and AQA the lowest (57.1%).

Percentage of questions where students were directed to discuss either women or men (as named individuals or as groups) in their answers (2022 and 2023 exam series combined)

Although Edexcel had the smallest number of medieval exam questions out of the three exam boards, within those topics they tended to have a higher proportion of questions on women. OCR, in comparison, had the greatest number of medieval questions but the lowest proportion of questions on women.

Women appeared in very few instances where questions referred to historical individuals, either by name or by title (whether students were directed to discuss these individuals in their answers or not). In the June 2022 series, there were 86 instances

where specific individuals were named in questions: 2 were women and 84 were men.[7] The June 2023 data included 78 instances of named individuals of which only 3 were women and 75 were men. Out of 164 instances in total, 5 were women and 159 were men. Divided across assessment levels, at GCSE, 2 women were named in questions compared to 42 men (21 named men to every 1 woman). At A Level, 3 women were named in questions compared to 117 men (39 named men to every 1 woman). AQA and Edexcel had the highest number of questions with instances of named women (2 across both series), whereas OCR had the lowest number of questions (1 across both series).

Number of instances in which named individuals (women or men) were referred to in questions, split between level, exam board and exam series

Women in source analyses

In order to broaden opportunities to find medieval women, we looked beyond exam essay questions to consider other elements of the exam papers such as the content of the

---

[7] Appendix C, Table 4.

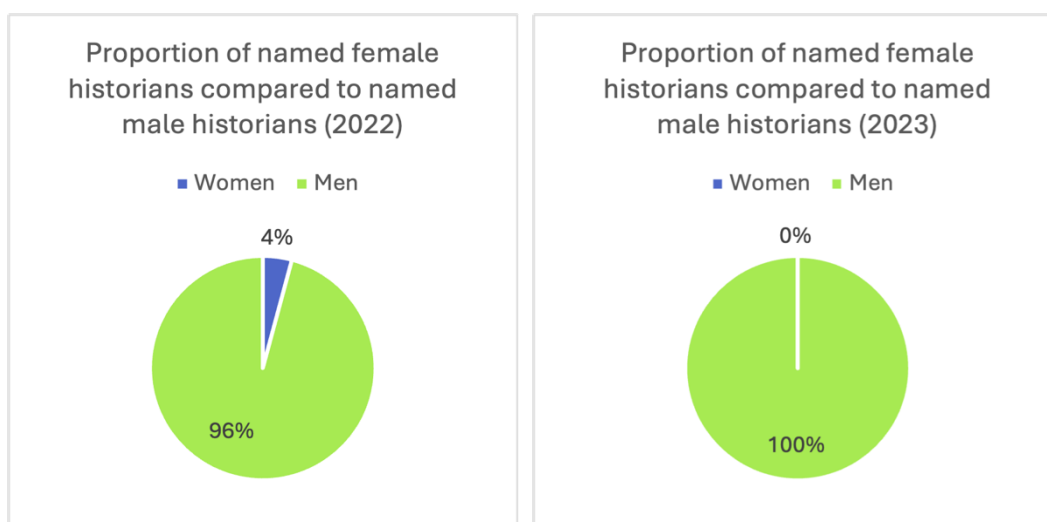source analyses, both text and images. These would often appear in the exam booklets or as separate inserts.

As with exam questions, women appeared more infrequently than men in source analyses. There were 33 questions with source extracts out of 187 questions in the June 2022 series and 34 questions with source extracts out of 187 questions in the June 2023 series. Women appeared (as named individuals or groups) in 8 extracts out of 33 (featuring 5 named women) in the June 2022 series; men appeared in 32 out of 33 extracts (112 named men). For the June 2023 series, women appeared in 9 extracts out of 34 (5 named women); men appeared in 31 out of 34 extracts (131 named men). Out of 253 instances of references to named individuals or gender-specific groups overall, only 10 related to women, while the remaining 243 related to men.
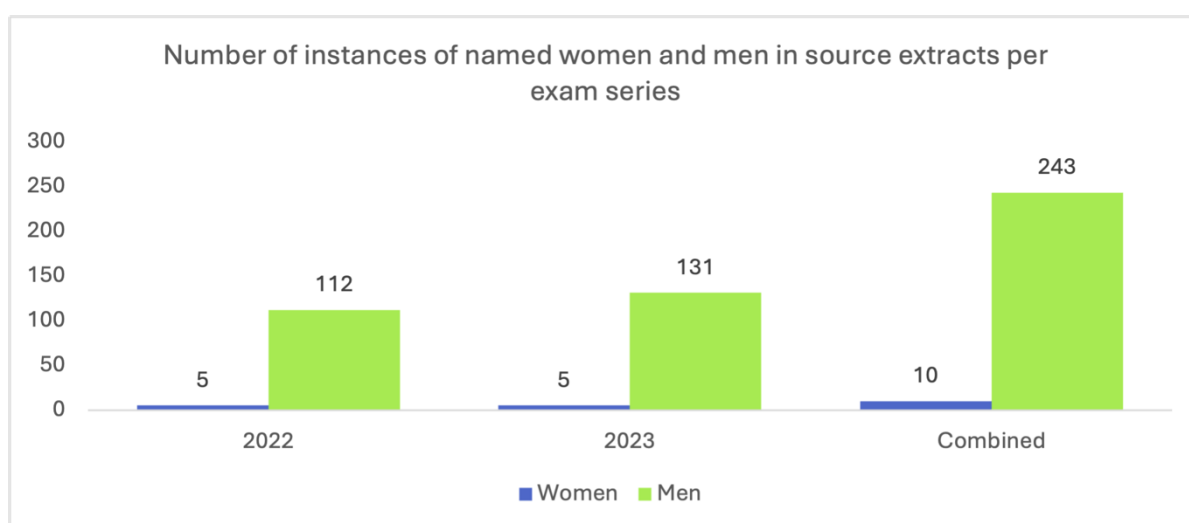
The source extracts sometimes included quotes from historians of medieval history. Of 24 historians quoted in the June 2022 series, only 1 was a woman whereas the remaining 23 were men. The June 2023 series featured 20 historians, none of whom were women.[8] Breaking these figures down further, at GCSE across both series, students were given

---

[8] Appendix C, Table 5.

quotes from 10 named historians – none were women. At A Level, 34 historians were quoted, 1 was a woman.

Proportion of named female historians compared to named male historians (2022)
■ Women ■ Men
4%
96%

Proportion of named female historians compared to named male historians (2023)
■ Women ■ Men
0%
100%

Women in the mark scheme

Alongside source extracts, this survey also examined mark schemes which typically offered indicative content in the form of sample answers.

Women were included in the mark schemes for the June 2022 series for 47 questions (out of 187), while men were included for 146 questions. For the June 2023 series, women were included in the mark schemes for 38 questions (out of 187). In comparison, for the same series, men were included for 156 questions.[9] Across the assessment levels, at GCSE for both series, women were included in the mark scheme for 38 questions while men appeared in the mark scheme for 141 questions. At A Level, women appeared in the mark scheme for 47 questions, while men appeared in 161 questions.

---

[9] Appendix C, Tables 6a and 6b.

Teaching Medieval Women

Number of questions with references to women and men in the mark schemes per exam board and level (2022 and 2023 series combined)

Percentage of total surveyed questions with references to women and men in the mark schemes
(2022 and 2023 exam series combined)
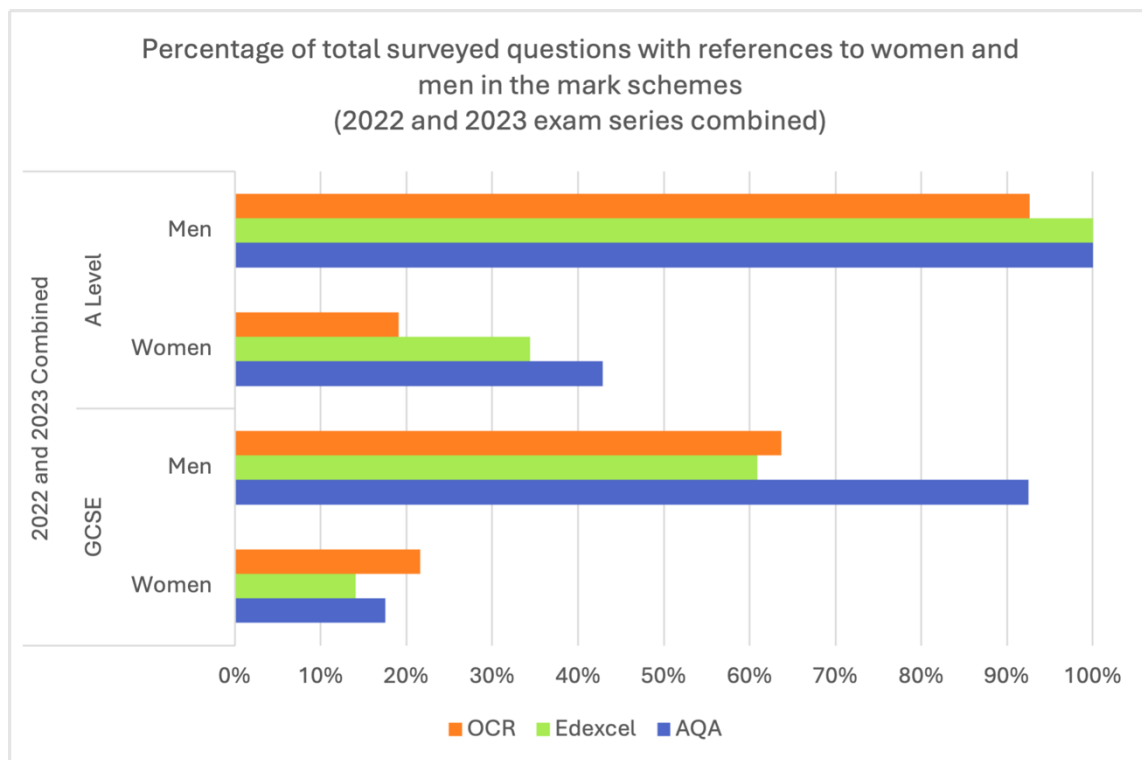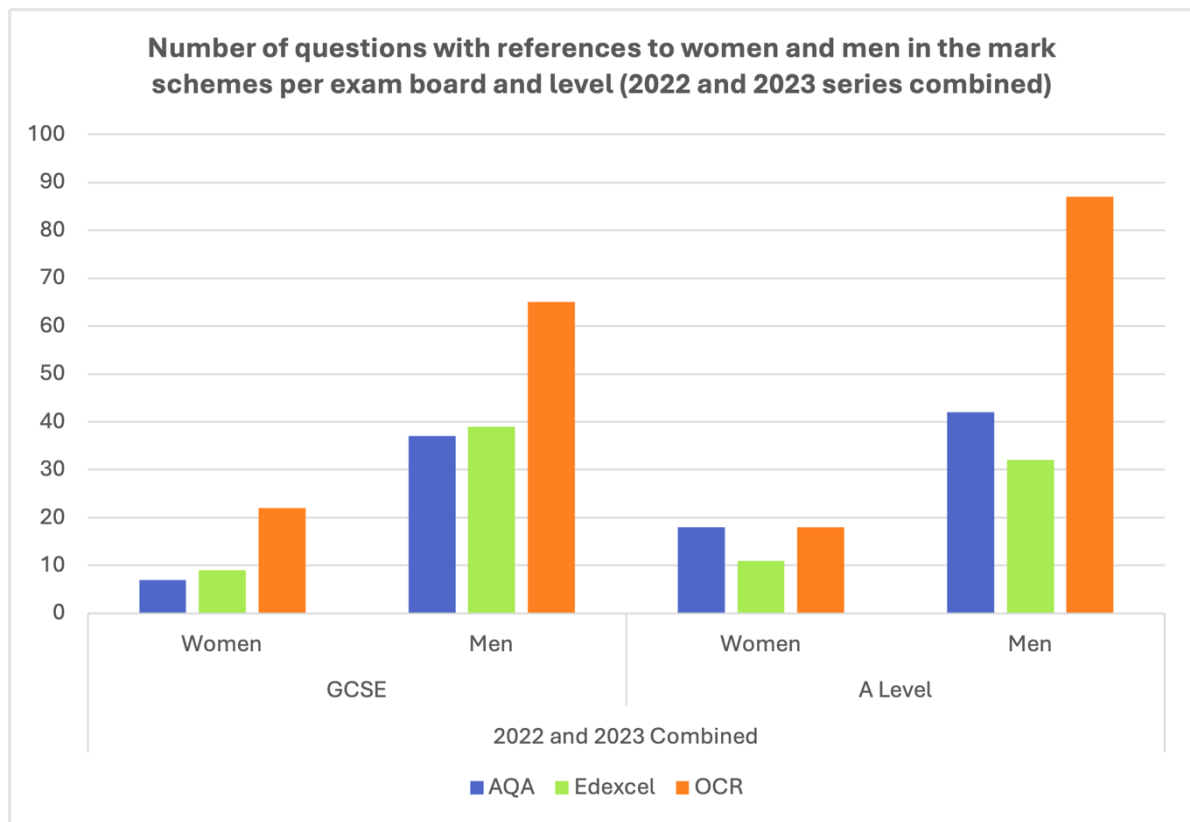
Responses to questions in the mark schemes tended to feature multiple references to named individuals or groups. In the June 2022 series there were 63 references to women (as named individuals or as gender-specific groups) with an average of 0.34 references per question (out of 187 questions). In comparison, there were 625 references to men in the June 2022 series with an average of 3.34 references per question. In the June 2023 series mark schemes there were 44 references to women, with an average of 0.24 references per question. In contrast, there were 581 references to men in the June 2023 series, making an average of 3.11 references per question.

Comparison of number of references to women and men in the mark scheme (2022 and 2023 series combined)
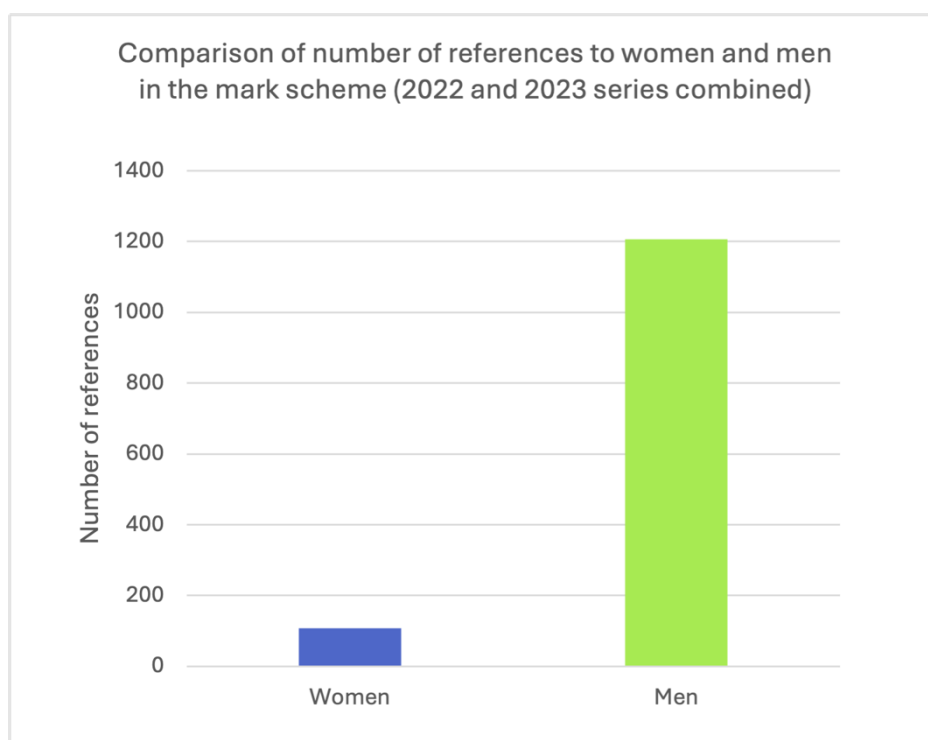
Concluding remarks

Overall, out of the total **374** questions surveyed from both series (2022 and 2023), students were directed to discuss women (or female specific groups) in their answers for **only 2%** of questions.[10] In comparison, they were directed to discuss men (or male-specific groups) in **40%** of the questions. At GCSE, students were directed to discuss

---

[10] Statistics have been rounded up to nearest whole number in the conclusion.

women (or female-specific groups) in their answers on average in **1%** of questions and men (or male-specific groups) in **24%** of questions. At A Level, students were directed to discuss women (or female-specific groups) in their answers on average in **3%** of questions and men (or male-specific groups) in **61%** of questions.
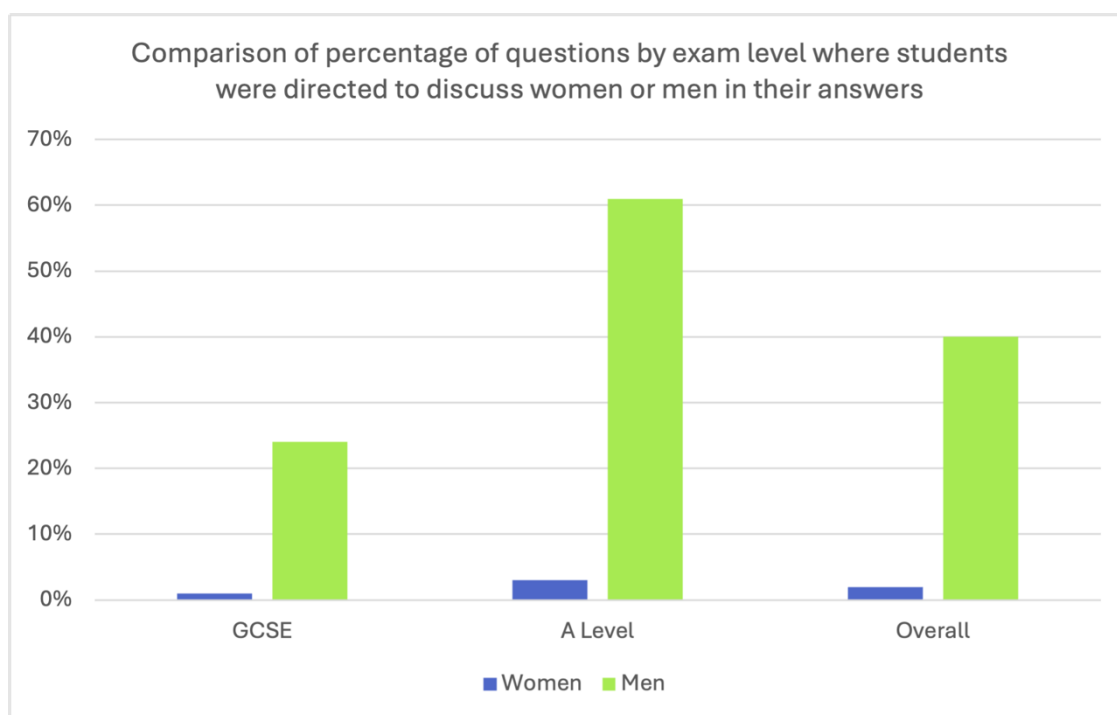
Where questions contained references to named individuals, women made up only **3%** of the whole of these instances (**roughly 32 men for every 1 woman**). **4%** of named individuals included in source analyses were women (**24 men for every 1 woman**). Women appear in mark scheme as possible topics for responses in only **23%** of the 374 questions, while men or male-specific groups comprise **81%** of the possible topics. However, as men tend to appear multiple times in the mark scheme, more frequently than women, the total number of references to men in the mark scheme exceed women by **roughly 10:1**. **Only 1 out of 44** historians of medieval history quoted in the exam content for both series was a woman. It is important to note that the focus of this study was primarily on exams with medieval content, however preliminary investigations of the wider pool of exam questions suggests these findings are likely to prove representative

of History exam content across early modern and modern topics. The current initial investigation has focused solely on references to women to highlight this issue in relation to the provision of medieval history, but TMW recognises and supports additional work to enable equality diversity and inclusion for all the intersectional factors which influence the representation of women in history as well as the need to ensure LGBTQI+ histories receive appropriate recognition and support. Moving forward, we are committed to providing teaching materials that cover these areas as well as providing a more decolonised and globally representative set of exemplars which further our knowledge of women's diverse medieval pasts.

In light of these findings, and on the basis of our CPD work with teachers of medieval history, the Teaching Medieval Women group recommend the following courses of action:

- Increase the inclusion of pre-modern women in module specifications, course materials and textbooks at secondary education.
- Ensure increased representation of women in assessments to encourage the teaching of women at GCSE and A-Level.
- Provide questions which allow students more opportunities to discuss women in their answers.
- Use more gender-neutral language in assessments.
- Improve the balance of quoted material from male and female secondary historians in course materials and assessments.
- Changing assessments in this way would allow teachers more versatility to insert women into the current curriculum rather than relying on significant and potentially time-and-resource-expensive new modules.
- An effective programme of CPD and a "sweet shop" of freely available resources: e.g. individual biographies, source extracts, to support teachers inserting more women into the current medieval history provision.

Appendix A – Explaining the criteria

Selection of exam papers and questions

The exam papers surveyed were chosen if they covered the medieval period (400AD–1450AD). Papers which contained content from a broader time period, such as GCSE breadth topics (e.g. AQA GCSE module 'AA Britain: Health and the people: c1000 to the present day'), were also surveyed. Non-medieval questions and content from these papers were included in the survey.

Questions where students were directed to discuss women or men (as named individuals or groups) in their answer

This question could refer to a named individual, a person with a gender-specific title (e.g. queen, king), or to a gendered group or organisation that was restricted to a particular gender (e.g. kings, the Papacy). The question could be direct, such as asking about women's involvement in the military or the political impact of a particular individual, or more indirect, such as asking students to discuss the impact of piracy on Elizabeth I's reign (see **Appendix B**). It would be assumed that the student would have to discuss Elizabeth in their answer. Questions where students could talk about men or women, such as in a question about the monarchy from 1066–1714, were treated as gender neutral and not counted.

Counting named individuals

Named individuals were identified either as named persons (e.g. Edward I) or titled persons who could be identified as a historical question (e.g. the earl of Warwick in a question relating to 1460s politics). Named individuals were counted only once per question or source extract, even if they appeared multiple times in a question or source extract.

Instances versus individuals

Instances were defined as a time when an individual was referred to in a question or source extract. Individuals were defined as historic persons.

References in the mark scheme

Mark schemes often offered indicative content and sample answers to questions. References are defined as times when a gendered individual or group were referred to in the mark scheme per question.

Appendix B – Papers assessed as part of this survey

Board	Level	Paper	Topic	No. of questions
AQA	GCSE	8145/2A/A	AA Britain: Health and the people: c1000 to the present day	4
AQA	GCSE	8145/2A/B	AB Britain: Power and the people: c1170 to the present day	4
AQA	GCSE	8145/2A/C	AC Britain: Migration, empires and the people: c790 to the present day	4
AQA	GCSE	8145/2B/A	BA Norman England, c1066–c1100	4
AQA	GCSE	8145/2B/B	BB Medieval England: the reign of Edward I, 1272–1307	4
AQA	AS	7041/1A	1A The Age of the Crusades, c1071–1204	3
AQA	A Level	7042/1A	1A The Age of the Crusades, c1071–1204	4
AQA	AS	7041/2A	2A Royal Authority and the Angevin Kings, 1154–1216	3
AQA	A Level	7042/2A	2A Royal Authority and the Angevin Kings, 1154–1216	4
AQA	AS	7041/2B	2B The Wars of the Roses, 1450–1499	3
AQA	A Level	7042/2B	2B The Wars of the Roses, 1450–1499	4
Edexcel	GCSE	1HI0/10	10: Crime and punishment in Britain, c1000–present	6
Edexcel	GCSE	1HI0/11	11: Medicine in Britain, c1250–present	6
Edexcel	GCSE	1HI0/12	12: Warfare and British society, c1250–present	6
Edexcel	GCSE	1HI0/13	13: Migrants in Britain, c800–present	6
Edexcel	GCSE	1HI0/B1	B1: Anglo-Saxon and Norman England, c1060–88	4
Edexcel	GCSE	1HI0/B2	B2: The reigns of King Richard I and King John, 1189–1216	4
Edexcel	A Level	9HI0/1A	1A: The crusades, c1095–1204	5
Edexcel	A Level	9HI0/2A	2A.1: Anglo-Saxon England and the Anglo-Norman Kingdom, c1053–1106 2A.2: England and the Angevin Empire in the reign of Henry II, 115	6
Edexcel	A Level	9HI0/30	30: Lancastrians, Yorkists and Henry VII, 1399–1509	5

OCR	GCSE A	J410/08	Migration to Britain c.1000 to c.2010 (1)	4
OCR	GCSE A	J410/09	Power: Monarchy and Democracy in Britain c.1000 to 2014 (2)	4
OCR	GCSE A	J410/10	War and British Society c.790 to c.2010 (3)	4
OCR	GCSE A	J410/12	Castles: Form and Function c.1000–1750 (3)	2
OCR	GCSE B	J411/14	Crime and Punishment, c.1250 to present	7
OCR	GCSE B	J411/17	Migrants to Britain, c.1250 to present	7
OCR	GCSE B	J411/11	The Norman Conquest, 1065–1087	5
OCR	GCSE B	J411/11	The People's Health, c.1250 to present	7
OCR	GCSE B	J411/71	Viking Expansion, c.750–c.1050	7
OCR	GCSE B	J411/81	The First Crusade, c.1070–1100	4
OCR	A Level	Y101/01	Alfred and the Making of England 871–1016	3
OCR	A Level	Y102/01	Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest 1035–1107	3
OCR	A Level	Y103/01	England 1199–1272	3
OCR	A Level	Y104/01	England 1377–1455	3
OCR	A Level	Y105/01	England 1445–1509: Lancastrians, Yorkists and Henry VII	3
OCR	A Level	Y201/01	The Rise of Islam c.550–750	4
OCR	A Level	Y202/01	Charlemagne 768–814	4
OCR	A Level	Y203/01	The Crusades and the Crusader States 1095–1192	4
OCR	A Level	Y204/01	Genghis Khan and the Explosion from the Steppes c.1167–1405	4
OCR	A Level	Y301/01	The Early Anglo-Saxons c.400–800	4
OCR	A Level	Y302/01	The Viking Age c.790–1066	4
OCR	A Level	Y303/01	English Government and the Church 1066–1216	4
OCR	A Level	Y304/01	The Church and Medieval Heresy c.1100–1437	4

Appendix C – Data tables used for figures

Table 1: Number of papers with medieval content surveyed (GCSE, A Level and combined) for each exam series compared across the three main exam boards

Exam board	GCSE			A Level**			GCSE and A Level combined		
	No. of papers with medieval content surveyed	Total papers per series	% of total	No. of papers with medieval content surveyed	Total papers per series	% of total	No. of papers with medieval content surveyed	Total papers per series	% of total
AQA	5	16	31.3	6	53	11.3	11	69	15.9
Edexcel	6	17	35.3	3	26	11.5	9	43	20.9
OCR*	10	26	38.5	13	66	19.7	23	92	25
Total	21	59	35.6	22	145	15.2	43	204	21.1

*OCR has two History GCSEs (History A: Explaining the Modern World and History B: Schools History Project). The papers for each GCSE have been combined for this analysis.

** AS and A Level papers have been grouped together under A Level.

Table 2: Number of questions from papers with medieval content surveyed (GCSE, A Level and combined) for each exam series compared across the three main exam boards

Exam board	GCSE			A Level			GCSE and A Level combined		
	No. of questions from papers surveyed	Total no. of questions per series	% of total	No. of questions from papers surveyed	Total no. of questions per series	% of total	No. of questions from papers surveyed	Total no. of questions per series	% of total
AQA	20	72	27.8	21	189	11.1	41	261	15.7
Edexcel	32	79	40.5	16	168	9.5	48	247	19.4
OCR	51	115	44.3	47	247	19	98	362	27.1
Total	103	266	38.7	84	604	13.9	187	870	21.5

Table 3a: Number of questions where students were directed to discuss women and men in their answers divided by exam board, series, and level

Exam board	2022				2023				2022 and 2023 Combined			
	GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
AQA	0	8	0	13	0	6	2	11	0	14	2	24
Edexcel	2	7	1	9	0	7	0	11	2	14	1	20
OCR	0	10	0	32	1	6	0	28	1	16	0	60
Total	2	25	1	54	1	19	2	50	3	44	3	104

Table 3b: Percentage of questions surveyed where students were directed to discuss women and men in their answers divided by exam series, exam board and level

Exam board	2022				2023				2022 and 2023 Combined			
	GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
AQA	0%	40%	0%	61.9%	0%	30%	9.5%	52.4%	0%	35%	4.8%	57.1%
Edexcel	6.3%	21.9%	6.3%	56.3%	0%	21.9%	0%	68.8%	3.1%	21.9%	3.1%	62.5%
OCR	0%	19.6%	0%	68.1%	2%	11.8%	0%	59.6%	1%	15.7%	0%	63.8%

Table 4: Number of instances in which women or men were referred to in questions divided across level, exam board and series

Exam board	2022				2023				2022 and 2023 Combined			
	GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
AQA	0	9	0	15	0	7	2	17	0	16	2	32
Edexcel	1	6	1	12	0	9	0	9	1	15	1	21
OCR	0	8	0	34	1	3	0	30	1	11	0	64
Total	1	23	1	61	1	19	2	56	2	42	3	117

Table 5: Number of quoted historians divided across gender, level, exam board and series

Exam board	2022				2023				2022 and 2023 Combined			
	GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
AQA	0	2	0	5	0	2	0	4	0	4	0	9
Edexcel	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	6
OCR	0	3	1	10	0	3	0	8	0	6	1	18
Total	0	5	1	18	0	5	0	15	0	10	1	33

Table 6a: Number of questions that have references to women and men in the mark schemes per exam board, level and series

Exam board	2022				2023				2022 and 2023 Combined			
	GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
AQA	4	17	8	21	3	20	10	21	7	37	18	42
Edexcel	6	18	7	16	3	21	4	16	9	39	11	32
OCR	14	31	8	43	8	34	10	44	22	65	18	87
Total	24	66	23	80	14	75	24	81	38	141	47	161

Table 6b: Percentage of questions surveyed with references to women and men in the mark schemes compared to the total number of relevant questions per category

Exam board	2022				2023				2022 and 2023 Combined			
	GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level		GCSE		A Level	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
AQA	20%	85%	38.1%	100%	15%	100%	47.6%	100%	17.5%	92.5%	42.9%	100%
Edexcel	18.8%	56.3%	43.8%	100%	9.4%	65.6%	25%	100%	14.1%	60.9%	34.4%	100%
OCR	27.5%	60.8%	17%	91.5%	15.7%	66.7%	21.3%	93.6%	21.6%	63.7%	19.1%	92.6%

Appendix D – Questions where students were explicitly directed to discuss women in their answers

June 2022 series

Edexcel	GCSE	2B The reigns of King Richard I and King John, 1189–1216	1HIA/B2	1b	Explain why John was able to secure his power when he became king. (Students directed to refer to Eleanor of Aquitaine in their answer).
Edexcel	A Level	1A The crusades, c1095–1204	9HI0/1A	4	How far do you agree that, in the years 1100–92, Queen Melisende provided the most significant example of good governance in the crusader states?
Edexcel	GCSE	12 Warfare and British society, c1250–present and London and the Second World War, 1939–45	1HIA/12	6	'In the years c1700–present, the most significant development in the civilian experience of war was the organisation of a Home Front during the First and Second World Wars.' How far do you agree? Explain your answer. (Students directed to discuss women in their answer).

June 2023 series

AQA	AS	2B The Wars of the Roses, 1450–1499	7041/2B	2	'Queen Margaret of Anjou was the most significant influence on the developing factional rivalry, in the years 1456 to 1460.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.
AQA	A Level	2B The Wars of the Roses, 1450–1499	7042/2B	3	To what extent were the quarrels between the King and the Earl of Warwick, in the years 1464 to 1470, due to the marriage of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville?
OCR A	GCSE	2C War and British Society c.790 to c.2010	J410/10	2	Explain the impact of English privateers during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603).