'Victims of History': challenging students' perceptions of women in history

As postgraduate historians with teaching responsibilities at the University of York, Bridget Lockyer and Abigail Tazzyman were concerned to tackle some of the challenges reported by their students who had generally only encountered women's history in a disconnected way through stand-alone topics or modules. Their response was to create a series of five workshops for Year 12 students, intended both to investigate the impact of this separation from 'mainstream history' and to give the students a greater and more diverse knowledge of women's history, encouraging critical engagement with the curriculum. In this article they first explore the barriers to learning and teaching women's history as revealed in student questionnaires, with interviews with history teachers and recordings of the workshops that they ran. They then present a number of suggestions as to how teachers could help students to think about the past lives of both women and men, ensuring they are not automatically presented in binary opposition and that the diversity of experiences across genders is explored.

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It's not that people are purposely leaving women out, it's because big political events and stuff generally didn't have much to do with women because they weren't so important at that time.

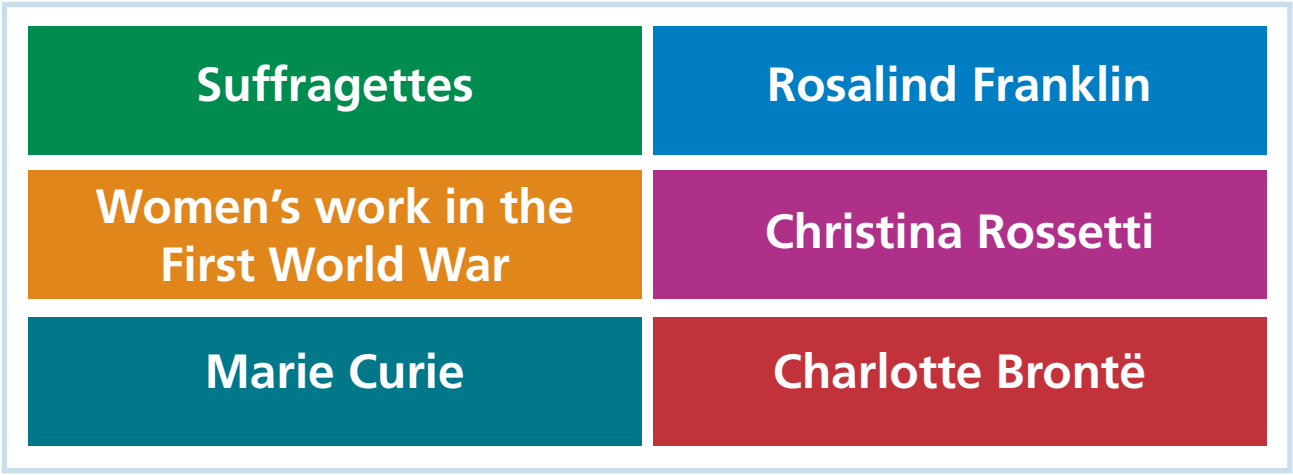
The Year 12 student who made this comment was responding to a question about whether women and men were represented equally in the school history curriculum. It proved to be a popular view within the class, hinting at a major barrier to teaching and learning women's history.

The student was participating in a project called *Teaching Women's History*, which worked with three schools in York during 2014-15 to gauge students' perceptions of women's history, deliver workshops on the history of women and hold discussions with history teachers. The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, with support from the Historical Association, and was developed and organised by a team of postgraduate students at the University of York. The idea for the project came about after discussing some of the challenges of studying and researching women's history with our undergraduate history students. In particular, students highlighted the disconnected way women's history often features on the curriculum both at school and university, usually as part of a stand-alone module, lecture or exam question. We decided to create a series of five workshops for Year 12 students which would investigate the impact of this separation from 'mainstream history' and also give students a greater and more diverse knowledge of women's history, encouraging critical engagement with the curriculum. The three schools we worked with were chosen because of their proximity and existing links to the university and the workshops formed part of the students' enrichment programme. Our purpose was to open up a new dialogue about the inclusion of women's history in schools and find out what challenges school students and teachers face in teaching and learning about women's history in order to ask what changes can be made.

The place of women's history in the curriculum

One of the aims of England's 2014 National Curriculum for history was to ensure that all pupils 'know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative' and within this, 'how people's lives have shaped this nation'.[1] Former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, intended the new curriculum to present 'a clear narrative of British progress with a proper emphasis on heroes and heroines from our past'.[2] The very notion of trying to create a coherent historical narrative, never mind a narrative of 'British progress' based upon the lives of significant individuals, was much contested when the initial draft of the curriculum was published in 2013.[3] It was criticised by some history teachers, academics and media commentators as being too 'old school', Anglo-centric and jingoistic.[4] There was particular furore over the planned exclusion of Mary Seacole from the Key Stage 2 curriculum, one of the few ethnic minority women to feature in the previous curriculum.[5] Seacole's inclusion had been seen by some as paying lip-service to a politically correct agenda which ultimately devalued Florence Nightingale's own contributions in the Crimea and as a pioneer of the nursing profession.[6] Others argued that Seacole led a remarkable life and the fact that her work was so celebrated by her contemporaries was meaningful and should be acknowledged.[7] Seacole was reinserted into the

Figure 1: Students' responses when asked to identify any women they could remember learning about in history lessons



final version of the curriculum, but the story of her contested inclusion demonstrates that figures whose history does not fit into a dominant political narrative are more vulnerable to their inclusion being seen as tokenistic and as a result are at greater risk of disappearing from view. Many commentators feared that the proposed 'back to basics' curriculum, with a focus on a who's who of British history would mean that the only women students would learn about would be monarchs, and this would consign the lives of the vast majority of women in history to the rubbish bin.[8]

Coincidentally, at the same time women's place in the National Curriculum for history was being debated there was a prominent campaign to have women represented on English banknotes, after the Bank of England announced that Elizabeth Fry's image on the £5 note would be replaced by an image of Winston Churchill.[9] The campaign was ultimately successful, and an image of Jane Austen will appear on the £10 note in 2017. Tellingly, the campaign was met with fierce attacks from some quarters, particularly on social media, where some campaigners received death and rape threats.[10] More generally, it sparked discussions about who was significant enough to be represented on a banknote, and whether the inclusion of female figures was just tokenism.

Although the debates which surrounded the new National Curriculum and the banknotes campaign were catalysts for our project, debates about the place and status that should be accorded to women's history in school history are not new. Since the 1970s, historians and teachers have been working to raise the profile of women's history, uncovering women's stories and introducing them into school and university curricula.[11] Discussion about how best to incorporate women's experiences in school curricula have been the subject of several *Teaching History* articles. Joanne Pearson was critical of the rationale that guided some teachers' choices when designing the curriculum, arguing that decisions are frequently made out of habit, a perceived lack of resources

Figure 2: Examples of students' responses when asked whether they thought it was important to have women represented on the banknotes

> It is but it's quite difficult to find a woman of equal importance to a lot of the men on there. You could argue that it's almost derogatory because you've got Charles Darwin who came up with the whole theory of evolution [murmurs of disagreement from the rest of the class]. Well you know, he was a big part of that. And it's not women's fault, but there's a lot more dominance with men. So it's sort of like 'aww Jane Austen she wrote a book' compared to all these big scientists and stuff. I think it's hard, because of women's role in history, I'm not saying it's right or anything, it's hard to find any women who are… I was going to say important, do you know what I mean?

> I'm not saying Jane Austen isn't great but like if you put a woman on who hasn't done something as much as the men have done I think it makes the situation worse.

Figure 3: Examples of students' responses in the final workshop when asked for recommendations on how to improve the teaching and learning of women's history in the classroom

> [There should be] more focus on individuals in science and English etc. because you usually only hear about men. It should be put in equally alongside men, it shouldn't be separate.

> If you're teaching about it just because they're women you are reinforcing the separation from male history which isn't what you want to do, you want to integrate it together.

> You should focus on women throughout the whole of history not just specific things like the suffragettes.

or due to assessment practicalities, which often results in the exclusion of women.[12] Pearson instead encouraged teachers to justify their decisions within a historical framework. She used significance criteria developed by Partington (1980), Phillips (2002) and Counsell (2002) to create a list of individual women who might be included on the curriculum, and to engage with the wealth of resources that exists on women's history.[13] Similarly, Flora Wilson stressed the importance of teachers keeping up to date with current historical scholarship in order to present their students with a more diverse picture of the past and enrich their knowledge.[14] Ruth Tudor had a different concern: that women's history was often taught in one-off units such as 'Women and War' and 'Women and Suffrage', arguing that although this ensures women are represented in the curriculum, it sets 'women's history' apart and implicitly renders it less important.[15] The dilemma Tudor recognised is that in 'mainstreaming' women's history there is a danger that 'women's unique experiences and contribution could all too easily "disappear"'.

This is a dilemma we too acknowledge and is the focus of discussion in this article. Throughout this piece, we use the term 'women's history' to refer to the study of women's past experiences and the study of women's role in history, although some of our workshops touched on gender history, which focuses on historical constructions of femininity and masculinity. We will first explore the barriers to learning and teaching women's history, using qualitative data derived from student questionnaires, interviews with history teachers and the workshops themselves which were all recorded. Through identifying these challenges we hope to provide some suggestions regarding the inclusion of women in the history classroom and how to challenge students' perception of women's history.

Barriers to learning women's history: students' perspective

1) Lack of coverage in the secondary school curriculum

To identify what barriers (real or perceived) might exist to studying women's history we ran a series of five workshops with a group of Year 12 students from the three participating schools. One of our first tasks was to ask students to identify any women they could remember learning about in history lessons (see Figure 1). Their responses were illuminating. Most of the women they identified had not been encountered in their history lessons: Marie Curie and Rosalind Franklin were discussed in science lessons, Christina Rossetti in English and Amy Johnson and Charlotte Brontë found their way on to the list because one of the schools had two houses named after them. The only topics primarily concerned with women's history students could specifically remember learning about in history were the suffragettes and women's work in the First World War, interestingly the same separate topics referred to by Tudor. We observed that the women students identified were drawn almost exclusively from a narrow time period, namely the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pearson found that a similar pattern emerged in the sample curricula she studied; whereas male historical figures named in curricula ranged from the eleventh to the twentieth centuries, female historical figures were drawn from just two (the sixteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth). This finding was mirrored in our workshops when the students, pressed further, added Mary I and Elizabeth I to the list. Students' difficulty in naming more than a very few female historical figures or groups suggested that there were significant gaps in their knowledge of women's history. This was not the only finding

Figure 4: Teachers' suggestions about how to achieve better integration of women's history in the curriculum

> I suppose maybe just integrating [women's history] throughout [Years] 7,8,9, when looking at different chronological periods. I suppose it's just trying to look for links and connection in what you are currently studying. For example, when we're doing slavery in Year 8 it might be an opportunity to have a specific focus on the role of female abolitionists.

> I really do try and include everyday life, obviously include women's jobs and roles in that as well, not really making it explicit but just dealing with that as one thing. When we look at significant individuals because obviously significance is a big, core issue in history, we always make sure it's not the most traditional white British man, that sort of thing. But personally I think we should do more of that.

> It would be difficult, but take a big theme like 'equality' or 'work in wartime', and instead of looking it as 'this is women's work at war', 'this is African Americans' equality' deal with it much more thematically.

that troubled us. Students' only in-depth study of women's history was that of women's lives in the twentieth century, where the fight for women's equality was the central focus. This had given them a distorted perspective of the 'progress' made by women, as they appeared to think that women had been completely shackled by patriarchy and confined solely to the domestic sphere before 1900. We wondered whether, in seeking to demonstrate how momentous the women's suffrage movement and their participation in the First and Second World Wars was for women, some history teachers may have unintentionally undermined students' ideas about women who lived before the twentieth century.

2) A perception of women's history as 'less important'

In response to the question of whether or not women and men were represented equally in the curriculum there was a general consensus that although women were less well-represented, this was to be expected. We also asked students to speculate on who chooses the curriculum and why. Below are two of their responses:

They probably want to choose stuff which they think will be important and useful to know about, key events and things like that.

I don't think it's deliberately more about men though, without being sexist, there is more to learn about men, they've done more.

This last response was challenged by other students ('how do you know that?') sparking a lively discussion about how records of women's achievements have often been lost or deliberately concealed. Yet certainly some students did believe that women in the past contributed little to society. In their view, in comparison to men women had not taken part in or even been present during big, 'world-changing'

events because they lacked the opportunities to do so. The exclusion of women from the history curriculum was a natural consequence of this. From the students' perspective, we could not learn about a history which never existed in the first place. We were particularly struck by students' assumption that the curriculum emerged organically (rather than resulting from conscious decisions), merely reflecting the 'truth' about women's position and roles in the past. Just as Haydn and Harris found in their research, students saw history as a body of knowledge to be learnt rather than a form of knowledge crafted for a purpose.[16]

The perception of some students that women's history was irrelevant was reinforced by their assumptions about what kinds of history counted as 'noteworthy' and therefore warranted inclusion in the school history curriculum. There was a general agreement that the most significant topics were war, politics and science. In their eyes these were the things that had shaped society, and students wanted to learn history that better enabled them to understand contemporary Britain. They felt that they should not be 'forced' to learn about women's history (which they regarded as distinct from war, politics and science) when women's contribution to the making of Britain (and the world) appeared to be so limited. This supports the findings of Adey and Biddulph and Haydn and Harris that suggest pupils are most engaged by subjects that they enjoy and perceive as relevant.[17] If women's history is seen by students as something tacked on to the curriculum as a seemingly token gesture it risks creating a barrier to student engagement. Similarly, if a topic is perceived by students to be tokenistic or its inclusion the result of political correctness this can often cause conflict and/or a conservative backlash in the classroom, as studies by both Titus and Langan and Davidson have found.[18]

3) A perception of women's history as tokenistic

The issue of tokenism also arose within a discussion about the banknotes campaign. Students were asked whether it was important for women to be represented on banknotes. Figure 2 shows two of their responses. One group of students argued that Jane Austen was less important than Charles Darwin (the outgoing face on the English £10 note). They contended that Austen had only been chosen because she was a woman and that her actual contribution to national life was insignificant in comparison to Darwin's. Here, we had to remind the students that male writers had also featured on banknotes in the past, most memorably Charles Dickens.

Not all the students felt the same. A significant minority argued that for a woman to be recognised at all was remarkable given the challenges she faced and this merited their inclusion. They also argued that women have often been written out of history, their contributions forgotten or undervalued. They acknowledged that women's lives were less well documented than men's and that in general, the history curriculum offers little coverage of the lives of ordinary people, only the famous or exceptional, and this was partly to blame for the under-representation of women.

The students obviously had some knowledge of women's history, but it was based on key individuals who the students felt were often presented as exceptional. This finding echoes previous research into the representation of women within history textbooks which found that the few women included who operated outside of the domestic sphere were presented as special and extraordinary.[19]

Teachers' perspectives

In the second stage of the project history teachers from two of the schools were asked about the barriers they perceived to teaching and learning women's history. Unsurprisingly (especially given that this was the focus of our project and that they had agreed to be interviewed) all the teachers interviewed said that teaching women's history was important, but challenging. There was also a consensus that they would like to spend more time teaching women's history and more generally 'history from below'. From our discussions, two perceived barriers to the inclusion of more women's history emerged. First was a perceived lack of readily-available published resources. The second more significant barrier was the availability of time in an already squeezed curriculum. We found that as a specific topic women's history was largely absent at Key Stage 3, although in Year 9 students often studied the women's suffrage movement and women's roles during the First and Second World Wars. At GCSE, one school taught quite a substantial project exploring how women's role had changed in the twentieth century. At A-level however, the political focus of specifications resulted in women's history being sidelined.[20] As one teacher explained:

> *I've just done the revision booklet for A-level, and it's just a booklet full of men. All the faces on the front are men, apart from Emmeline Pankhurst; she's the only woman, because it's 1906 to 1951, which is all male-dominated.*

Indeed, when we discussed the challenges of including women's history, one teacher said:

> *I suppose the very nature of squeezing in a thousand years of history, in two lessons a week for three years, you inevitably cut it down and just by the availability of the material some of it tends to be quite male-dominated, and can result in some projects being 90% white men if you're not careful.*

Another teacher agreed:

> *I think we do as much as we can crowbar in really. Because the unfortunate fact is that men have been the people in charge for the last…millennia, so if you're learning about political history the men are in charge… but whenever we can we try to cover the women's side of it.*

Including women in the school history curriculum was regarded by teachers as necessary and important, but difficult to do in a meaningful way. Consequently when women's history was included it was confined either to a separate unit of study or significant individuals were presented as exceptions within a dominant narrative focused largely on men's experiences and achievements. Many of the students in our workshops had internalised this and saw attempts to focus on women's history as pandering to political correctness and largely irrelevant.

Figure 5: Examples of the techniques used in the *Teaching Women's History* workshops

Activity	Rationale	Overview of activities	Sample activity
Using unusual sources and record-keeping	• To show the variety of women's experiences in different periods and consider why certain groups of people are present in some sources but not in others.	• Ask students to reflect on who records history and who is recorded where. • Ask students what the implications are of this for women's representation in historical records. • Use sources (often more unusual) where women are present to discuss their roles.	Three different sets of sources were used to explore women's daily lives in the medieval period: • Portraits of elite medieval women; • Women's wills; • Court case record of Agnes Huntington (used to look at her marriages). Discuss class, agency and significance of who was recorded.
Contrasting the rights of men and women	• To address the perception that the lives and experiences of most women and most men were fundamentally different. • To show differences and similarities between and across men and women's lives.	Students given a quiz which contrasts the rights and status of British men and women.	A quiz was given on the rights of British women and men in the last 300 years. Questions included: • When most men got the vote (1918) and when most women got the vote (1928); • When compulsory education was introduced for boys (1870) and for girls (1870). Similarities and differences across gender, class and race were discussed and whether this fitted with students' preconceptions.
Ideals versus reality	• To encourage students to critically consider the gender perceptions they have of different time periods and consider why they hold these and what they show about that period. • To challenge these perceptions/show that dominant images are not necessarily accurate or representative. • To consider women's representation in historical sources and popular culture.	• Students shown present-day interpretations of the period under study. Discussion of how men and women were presented in these. • Compare present-day ideals of women and men in popular culture or advice literature of the period. • Contrast gender ideals with realities/range of experiences.	• Present-day media representations of the Georgian period presented and discussed (e.g. recent adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*). Discussion of how women/men are represented in these, stereotypes and ideals present. • Play a guessing game with students using advice literature from the period under study and present day – are these quotes from advice on ideal womanhood from the Georgian period or the present day? • Contrast ideals described with realities of different women's lives: e.g. employment, political activism.

Why is it so difficult to overcome these barriers? It is not because scholarship on women's history is not out there. In our view it is in large part because despite numerous curriculum changes the dominant narrative remains the same. Men (or at least a certain type of man) and men's experiences are presented as the norm, women as the 'other' and ultimately a distraction. Changing the narrative is easy to say but hard to do.

Moving forwards

In order to change students' perceptions of women's history the prevailing dominant narrative needs to be changed but this has not and will not happen through a greater presence of women in the curriculum alone.

As part of the *Teaching Women's History* project both students and teachers were asked for their recommendations on how to improve the teaching and learning of women's history in the classroom. Figure 3 shows three examples of students' responses to this question.The students' recommendations varied but they all agreed that women's history should be more fully integrated into the main narrative. Teachers also highlighted the importance of integration (see Figure 4). By incorporating women's experiences into the main narratives taught teachers can avoid marginalising and de-contextualising women's experiences and ensure students are aware of the rich array of contributions women have made.

Integration in practice

A range of approaches was employed in the workshops to encourage students to reflect on and move beyond their pre-existing notions of women's experiences and roles in the past as well as men's. These approaches included: the use of less familiar sources and discussion of the recording of history; the use of women's history to discuss larger themes; contrasting the rights of men and women across time periods; investigation of stereotypes; and comparing ideals versus the reality of women's and men's experiences in different time periods. Figure 5 shows three examples of these approaches. The workshops were led by postgraduate experts. They used more unusual sources (e.g. wills, court records, diaries, tracts and conduct books) and stories to make women's history both more real to students and to show that women's history is not simply about the achievements of remarkable individuals, but instead consists of multiple narratives, including the daily lives of ordinary women. Based on our experiences we would suggest that university postgraduate students are a valuable resource that can help history teachers to address gaps in resources and sources as well as specialised knowledge. As experience of public engagement is now an important asset for those who wish to pursue a career in academia, many postgraduate students are looking for ways to share their expertise with a wider audience, meaning such partnerships are often attractive and beneficial for both parties.

These approaches proved successful in changing students' perceptions of women's role in the past (Figure 6). They also encouraged students to critically engage with how the curriculum is created and the dominant narratives that prevail within it. In the final workshop students were asked if they had changed their minds about women's history. These were three of their responses:

I thought women were passive victims throughout history so seeing they did play an active role was encouraging.

I found it quite interesting the fact that I thought before this that the reason why women weren't really talked about is because nothing was really recorded about them, because it was mainly men doing the recording. But having seen this and seen how much actually has been recorded about women I found that surprising why we don't really learn more about women.

I think they [women] *have more rights than I'd originally thought. I always thought that for the majority of history they were really passive and didn't really do anything, but they did more than I thought.*

Figure 6 shows some examples of students' summaries of what they had learned. They suggest that a different presentation of women's history had challenged and altered students' perceptions of women's roles. The students still said it was useful to learn about 'important' historical events, but they were also more interested and open to learning about the more ordinary aspects of people's lives.

Conclusion

In this article we argue that the integration of women's history into mainstream narratives, with a commitment from teachers that this takes place across the curriculum, can challenge dominant narratives that marginalise women and help to change students' perceptions of women in the past. In the short term, this approach is not about making large changes or overhauls to curricula but rather looking at existing curricula and ensuring women are present and portrayed in way that acknowledges their rich and varied experiences. We want to encourage teachers to teach women's history, not as something separate, but as something ordinary. To do so we need to ask students to think about the past lives of both women and men, ensuring they are not automatically presented in binary opposition and that the diversity of experiences across genders is explored.

Through the *Teaching Women's History* project we found that we were able to change students' minds once they could access more knowledge. To help them to do so, we have established a website from the project, providing teachers with resources including lesson plans, handouts and relevant sources.[21] At all levels of history teaching, we need to think about what history we value and what is deemed 'important'. Women's history has not yet become part of mainstream curricula in schools, and there is still work to do be done, but we hope by emphasising the value of integration, women's history will cease to be an added extra or token gesture.

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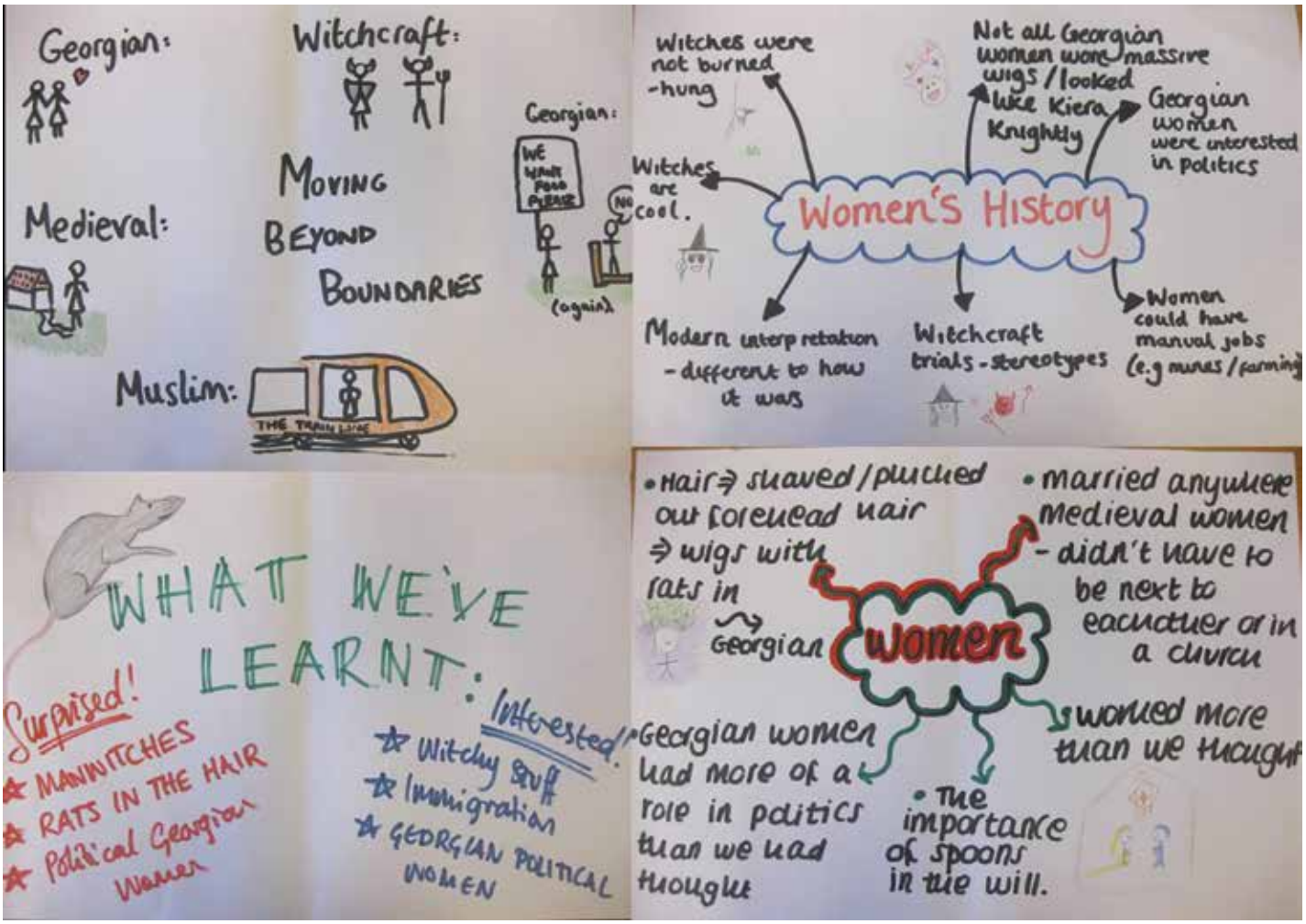
Figure 6: Work produced by students summarising what they had learnt during the workshops



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