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“Is Woman Adapted to the Dental Profession?”: The Debate over Women Dentists

Grades 6-12



Smithsonian Affiliate

Purpose: As women dentists like Emeline Roberts Jones, Lucy Beaman Hobbs Taylor, and Henriette Hirschfeld entered the male-dominated dental field in the late-nineteenth century, controversy erupted over whether women should be allowed to become dentists or were even capable of being dentists. That debate is the focus of this lesson. As a part of this lesson, students will define gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination, analyze historic examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination in dentistry through primary sources from the late-nineteenth century, and discuss how they can counter gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination in their own lives.

Program Link: This lesson is designed to further the discussion on gender stereotypes, gender bias, and gender discrimination in the dental profession introduced during the Agents of Change: Pioneering Women Dentists program.

Learning Objectives: During this lesson, students will...

- Review information learned from the Agents of Change: Pioneering Women Dentists program
- Define gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination
- Generate current examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination from a variety of sources including movies, TV shows, and literature
- Analyze primary source documents to discover the historical arguments given for and against women in dentistry as well as historical examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination in dentistry
- Connect historic examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination in dentistry to current examples
- Compile a list of actions that can be taken to counter gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination in school and the local community

Materials:

- [Primary Sources on the Debate over Women in Dentistry \(3 Con and 3 Pro sources\)](#)
- [Primary Source Analysis Worksheet](#)

Procedure:

1. Warm-Up:

- Have students answer the following questions:
 - Who were some of the pioneering women dentists discussed during the Agents of Change: Pioneering Women Dentists program?
 - What were their accomplishments? What obstacles did they face?
 - What examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination did they encounter?
- The purpose of these questions is to activate students' prior knowledge related to their experience during the Agents of Change: Pioneering Women Dentists program and prepare them to further discuss historic examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination in the dental field using primary sources from the late-nineteenth century.

- **Alternative Warm-Up:**

- ***If students have not completed the Agents of Change: Pioneering Women Dentists program, then have them do the following activity:***

- *What percentage of dentists do you think were female in 1870, 1900, 1930, and 1970?*
 - *After reviewing students' answers, provide them with the following statistics:*
 - * 1870: 0.3%
 - * 1900: 2.7%
 - * 1930: 1.8%
 - * 1970: 3.4%
 - *It might be helpful to write these percentages down where all students can see the answers as they are given. This allows students to clearly visualize the differences in the percentage of female dentists over the decades.*
 - *If students are curious about the fluctuations in percentages, feel free to explain to them that the percentage of women dentists likely declined from the 1920s to the 1960s due to the development of dental hygiene programs beginning in 1914. Today, dental hygienists are still overwhelmingly (~98%) female. In contrast, the feminist movement of the 1960s and the 1970s helped spark an increase in the number of female dentists.*
 - *More statistics can be found at:*
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c59afe1ca525b1aa6c9eae/t/5d0ce1398a95f10001db9d46/1561125177722/Number+and+Percentage+of+Dentists+by+Sex+1870-2010.pdf>
 - *Tell students that while women represented a small number of dentists in the United States until relatively recently, women's entry into the dental profession in the late-nineteenth century sparked a debate among dentists about women's place in the dental field, including the question of whether women were even capable of performing dentistry. Today, they are going to be examining arguments from both sides of the debate by looking at primary sources from the late-nineteenth century. Many of these primary sources contain examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination, so before they can begin looking at the primary sources, they must first understand what these terms mean.*

- Again, the section in italics should only be completed if students **have not** already done the Agents of Change: Pioneering Women Dentists program

2. **Reviewing Gender Bias/Gender Stereotypes/Gender Discrimination:**

- Explain to students that as pioneering women dentists like Emeline Roberts Jones, Lucy Beaman Hobbs Taylor, and Henriette Hirschfeld entered the male-dominated dental field in the late-nineteenth century, a debate erupted over whether women should be allowed to become dentists or were even capable of being dentists. Today, they will

examine arguments from both sides of the debate by looking at primary sources from the late-nineteenth century. Many of these primary sources contain examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination, so before they can begin looking at the primary sources, it is important for them to review what these terms mean. **There is no need to repeat this information to students if it has already been covered with students in the warm-up because they did not complete the Agents of Change: Pioneering Women Dentists program.**

- Work with students to define gender bias, gender discrimination, and gender stereotypes. If students have completed the Defining Gender Stereotypes/Bias/Discrimination activity and/or the Agents of Change: Pioneering Women Dentists program, encourage students to remember the definitions for gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination that were discussed during both activities. **For more information about how to define gender stereotypes, gender bias, and gender discrimination, see the Defining Gender Stereotypes/Bias/Discrimination lesson.**
- Ask students to brainstorm examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination
- Prompt them to give examples from multiple sources like TV shows, movies, literature, and their own personal lives
- Have students think about and answer the following questions:
 - What is your initial response to these examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination?
 - Are there any common trends in these examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination?
 - Is there anything that surprises you about these examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination, or about where these examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination originate?
 - How is gender discrimination connected to gender bias and gender stereotypes?
 - What are some of the negative effects of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination?
 - Why do you think that gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination can be hard to combat?
- Remind students that as they read their primary sources regarding the debate over women in dentistry, they will encounter historic examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination in the dental field

3. **Debate over Women in Dentistry:**

- While the historical debate over women in dentistry has already been introduced at this point, students will likely find it helpful to learn more about this debate before starting the primary source activity.
 - See John M. Hyson’s article “Women Dentists: The Origins” for information on the debate over women in dentistry. The link to this article is provided below:
(https://www.cda.org/Portals/0/journal/journal_062002.pdf).
- This activity can be completed individually or in groups
- Each individual/group should be given two primary source documents. One primary source document should express negative views about women in dentistry while the other should

express positive views about women in dentistry. Available primary sources to choose from are included in the lesson plan [Materials](#).

- Each individual/group should complete the [Primary Source Analysis Worksheet](#) for both of the documents assigned. This means that by the end of the activity, students will have completed a total of **two** Primary Source Analysis Worksheets—one for each of the primary sources.
- The activity will culminate with a whole group discussion on what has been learned. This is a time to focus collectively on the arguments made for and against women in dentistry, how these arguments relate to current examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination, and how gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination can be overcome.
- Possible Questions to pose during the discussion:
 - How did the author’s background (gender, age, career, etc.) impact his/her perspective?
 - What arguments are given for women being dentists?
 - What arguments are given against women in the dental profession?
 - What examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination did you find in the primary source documents?
 - Did only the authors against women dentists show gender bias, gender stereotypes, and/or gender discrimination? If not, how did the authors who supported women in the dental field still show gender bias, gender stereotypes, and/or gender discrimination?
 - Are similar arguments made today? If so, what are those arguments?
 - What is your initial response (feelings, thoughts, etc.) after reading the primary sources?
 - How might some of the information learned today about pioneering women dentists and the gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination they faced in the dental field help us to overcome gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination in our own lives?

4. **Wrap-Up:**

- As a class, revisit the current examples of gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination discussed earlier. Collectively, brainstorm and write down ways the students can tackle gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination in their own school/local community. If students have already completed the Agents of Change: Pioneering Women Dentists program, remind students about the characteristics the pioneering women dentists showed as change agents in their profession, and prompt students to see that they too can be change agents in their own school and local community. **For more information about change agents see the [What is a Change Agent? lesson](#).**

5. **Extension Activity Ideas:**

- To extend the above activity further, have students choose a small number of the tangible actions already brainstormed that they would specifically like to implement. These actions could be chosen individually or collectively. If chosen individually, have the students write down the actions that they have personally chosen to try to tackle gender bias, gender

stereotypes, and gender discrimination in their own lives. If chosen collectively, as a class, write down the selected actions on a poster that can be hung somewhere visible in the room. With either option, opportunity should be given regularly to revisit these actions and discuss students' progress.

- Gender Bias/Gender Stereotypes/Gender Discrimination Role Play:
 - Have students select some of the actions to combat gender bias, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination that were brainstormed earlier
 - Based on the actions chosen, students should role play scenarios in which these actions might need to be used. These role plays can be created by the students themselves or by the teacher.

Curriculum Connections

National Social Studies Education Standards 6-12	
NSES II	<p>a. Demonstrate an understanding that different people may describe the same event or situation in diverse ways, citing reasons for the differences in views.</p> <p>e. Demonstrate an understanding that people in different times and places view the world differently.</p> <p>f. Use knowledge of facts and concepts drawn from history, along with elements of historical inquiry, to inform decision-making about and action-taking on public issues.</p> <p>d. Identify and use various sources for reconstructing the past, such as documents, letters, diaries, maps, textbooks, photos, and others.</p>
NSES IV	h. Work independently and cooperatively to accomplish goals.
NSES V	d. Identify and describe examples of tensions between and among individuals, groups, or institutions, and how belonging to more than one group can cause internal conflicts.

Common Core	History/Social Studies	Writing	Speaking & Listening
6	RH.6-8.2 , RH.6-8.6	W.6.10	SL.6.1.C , SL.6.4
7	RH.6-8.2 , RH.6-8.6	W.7.10	SL.7.1.C , SL.7.1.D , SL.7.4
8	RH.6-8.2 , RH.6-8.6	W.8.10	SL.8.1.C , SL.8.1.D , SL.8.4
9-10	RH.9-10.2 , RH.9-10.6 , RH.9-10.9	W.9-10.10	SL.9-10.1.C , SL.9-10.1.D , SL.9-10.4
11-12	RH.11-12.2 , RH.11-12.6 , RH.11-12.9	W.11-12.10	SL.11-12.1.C , SL.11-12.1.D , SL.11-12.4

Bibliography:

Hyson, John M. "Women Dentists: The Origins." *Journal of the California Dental Association* 30, no. 6 (June 2002): 444-451. https://www.cda.org/Portals/0/journal/journal_062002.pdf.

Sindecuse Museum of Dentistry. "Why Women Choose Dentistry." *Women Dentists: Changing the Face of Dentistry*. Online exhibition. <https://www.sindecusemuseum.org/women-dentists>.

*For more information about this activity or the National Museum of Dentistry please email Patrick Cutter at pcutter@umaryland.edu or call 410-706-0600.