

Using Scaffolded Support to Help Young Women Overcome Biases in STEM & Business

Best Practices for Educators and Youth Workers



4
E
Q
U
A
L
I
T
Y



Check more at: 4equality.erasmus.site

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.



Co-funded by
the European Union

What Is Scaffolded Support?

Scaffolded support is a practical strategy youth workers can use to help young women build confidence, skills, and independence, especially when navigating STEM or business environments where subtle or direct bias can make them feel like they don't fully belong.

It works by giving just enough help at the right moment so a student can succeed at a task that might otherwise feel too difficult. As her confidence and abilities grow, the support is gradually reduced until she can do the task independently.

Think of it like temporary scaffolding around a building: it's there to support growth, and it is removed once the structure stands strong on its own.

This approach is especially important for young women entering or already in male-dominated fields, because research shows they often:

- Underestimate their abilities, even when performing just as well as their peers (Imposter Syndrome).
- Experience stereotype threat—the fear of confirming negative stereotypes, which can harm performance and confidence (Steele, 1997).
- Benefit significantly from structured encouragement, guided practice, and intentional feedback, which support persistence and self-belief (Master et al., 2016).

Scaffolded support directly counteracts these barriers by offering strength-focused guidance, modeling helpful strategies, and helping young women practice skills in safe, supported ways before using them independently in real-world STEM/business settings.



SCAN ME



Check more at: 4equality.erasmus.site

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.



**Co-funded by
the European Union**



How Scaffolded Support Helps Counter Bias?

Bias in STEM/business often appears as:

- Being talked over,
- Having ideas doubted,
- Being discouraged from leadership roles,
- Feeling outnumbered or isolated.

Scaffolding helps by:

- Giving them tools to respond, not just confidence.
- Reinforcing their competence, so bias has less psychological impact.
- Supporting them through challenging moments, instead of leaving them to “sink or swim.”
- Normalizing growth, not perfection.



The Scaffolded Support Process

STEP 1. Prepare for the challenge

Use practical strategies to lower anxiety, build readiness, and make success more likely.

1. Plan the task together - Break down a big task (e.g., pitching an idea, presenting a solution) into small steps. Use simple checklist to guide the process: *Prepare – Practice – Present – Reflect* and adjust or repeat steps as needed.

2. Practice scripts for difficult moments - Having pre-rehearsed responses builds competency and reduces stress. Prepare response scripts, e.g.:

- If someone interrupts you, you can say - “*Let me finish my point — I’ll be brief.*”
- If someone doubts your idea without explanation, you can follow up - “*I have data to support this idea; may I explain?*”
- If someone speaks to a male teammate instead of you, redirect confidently - “*I can answer that — this part of the project is mine.*”

3. **Model the responses first** - Show a short example of what the task looks like when done well. Guide students through the thinking process and application, as you were thinking aloud: *“Here’s how I break down this problem…”*

4. **Preempt bias** - Discuss possible bias situations without blaming individuals. Say - “If someone interrupts you, it isn’t about your ability. Here’s how we can handle it…”



STEP 2. Support during the challenge

When possible, provide subtle assistance, reassurance, and steadying when bias or stress appears.

1. **Be present and visible during real-life challenges** (if appropriate). Your presence can reduce stereotype threat.
2. **Use discreet cues** - A thumbs-up, A quiet “You’ve got this”, or a subtle reminder of the next step.
3. **Intervene against bias** when needed (if appropriate). Educators or youth workers can model respectful behaviours:
 - “Let’s let her finish her idea.”
 - “I want to make sure all voices are heard.”
4. **Validate competence in real time** (when in educational settings), e.g.:
 - “Great reasoning — keep going.”
 - “That’s a strong analysis.”

STEP 3. Strengthen independence after the challenge

Use challenges as a transformative experiences for growth and confidence building.

1. **Provide structure for reflection.** Encourage students to reflect either through a short “challenge journal” or by discussing the questions directly. Use simple prompts such as:
 - “What part felt strongest?”
 - “Where did you feel pushback or bias?”
 - “What helped you keep going?”

2. **Name the skill development.** Help students recognise the abilities they demonstrated. Use specific, simple statements such as:

- “Today you practiced clear communication.”
- “You stayed firm under pressure, that’s a real strength.”

This helps counter imposter feelings by making their progress visible.

3. **Gradually reduce support.** As confidence grows, step back and let the student take more ownership. For example, observe without intervening, encourage your students to start planning and choosing strategies to approach challenges independently.

This will help shift responsibility to the student while still keeping support available if needed.

4. **Celebrate growth, not perfection.** Acknowledge effort, learning, and progress rather than flawless performance. Bias can pressure young women to “prove themselves,” so you can balance this by highlighting improvement:

- “You made real progress today.”
- “This step makes you much stronger in this field.”

Practical activities to use

1. Bias Challenge Rehearsals - Role-Play

To prepare students for real-world gender bias moments, and reduce anxiety when those happen:

- Present common scenarios (being interrupted, idea dismissed etc.).
- Students practice responses using scripts.
- Increase difficulty gradually.

2. Confidence Ladders

To help building readiness for complex challenges, and reduce overwhelm, teach them to break big goals in do-able steps. Use a simple approach:

- Ask students to draw a ladder and put the big goal on the top (e.g. pitching my idea to a panel),
- Create 5-7 steps leading up to it,
- Help them identifying the first ‘small step’, while let the students identify remaining independently.



3. Reframing bias experiences

Teach cognitive reframing to reduce internalization of bias and imposter feelings., e.g.:

- Ask students to write, negative thoughts triggered by bias, e.g. “They doubt me; maybe I’m not good enough”.
- Challenge them to follow with balance narrative, e.g. “My work is strong and supported by evidence, while their doubt shown bias through the questions they asked me”.
- Discuss both.



Delivering Scaffolded Support Effectively

You don’t have to be a STEM expert to support a young woman in STEM. Your role is to build the scaffolding that helps her stand tall until she can hold the weight herself, and to step back proudly when she does.

- Keep your language simple and empowering, not technical.
- Avoid over-helping — let them struggle a little in safe ways.
- Focus on process, not perfection.
- Name bias without making students feel fragile.
- Make success visible (checklists, journals, strengths boards).
- Normalize doubt: “Everyone feels like this at first. It doesn’t mean you don’t belong.”