



# ESCÚCHAME

## Lessons Learned from the Integration of Gender-Based Violence Mitigation and Male Engagement Strategies for the Escúchame Project

Bobbi Gray and Jenna Smith (Grameen Foundation), Patricia Escoto (ODEF NGDO)  
October 2023

### Abstract

Escúchame is a 1.5 year project being implemented around San Pedro Sula in Honduras by financial services provider, ODEF Financiera, and their non-governmental and development organization, ODEF NGDO. In partnership with Grameen Foundation USA (Grameen), 200 female microfinance clients have participated in a curriculum called Resilient Life Resilient Business (RLRB) and 50 of them are participating in a series of three intrahousehold dialogues (IHDs) with their partners. Lessons for integrating gender-based violence (GBV) mitigation and male engagement strategies into women's economic empowerment (WEE) programming thus far have shown some promising quantifiable and anecdotal impacts such as improved knowledge of what GBV is and where to seek help for it, improved communication between partners, particularly around active listening, and improved attitudes towards gender equality. Moreover, the frontline facilitators providing RLRB education and facilitating the IHDs have experienced changes in their own attitudes and behaviors, at home and in the workplace. Yet, these promising results have not come without challenges. Scheduling of the IHDs for the couples have resulted in delays, as the female clients and their spouses have had to prioritize income generation over the IHDs. Despite receiving training to convey messages around GBV and where a survivor can seek help, facilitators still lack confidence in talking about GBV given its sensitivities. As a result of these findings, recommendations for integrating GBV and male engagement with WEE programming include: ensuring management and frontline staff engage in attitude and behavior change regarding gender, inclusion, power dynamics and unconscious bias as well as GBV prior to engaging participants in these same topics; fully equipping frontline staff with a list of trusted GBV referral actors that survivors can be linked to and providing multiple ways survivors can access this information including flyers; not introducing topics such as GBV without having previously established trust between the participants; engaging men in the same trainings, if possible, that women will receive to help level the playing field prior to engaging couples in methodologies such as the IHDs.

## Introduction

As part of the MujerProspera Challenge, funded by USAID, Grameen, in alliance with ODEF Financiera and ODEF NGDO, launched the Escúchame project with the objective of developing an empowering ecosystem for women entrepreneurs in Honduras by engaging men as allies. The project is being implemented in the Northern Departments of Yoro, Santa Bárbara, Cortés, Atlántida, Lempira and Intibucá with 200 women entrepreneurs, ages 18 to 35, who received an educational module called RLRB in addition to their existing financial services, such as credit and savings, and 50 of whom participated together with their spouses in a series of three IHDs. As part of RLRB, there are educational sessions on GBV and a reference to CuéntaNos, a service of the International Rescue Committee. CuéntaNos is a virtual platform (accessed via the Internet, Whatsapp, Facebook) that serves as a “hotline” and provides critical and timely information and social support services on GBV, health, education, legal assistance, etc. to GBV survivors, migrants, and other people in situations of high vulnerability and need.

This brief report will summarize lessons learned regarding engaging men in Escúchame programming and integrating GBV and WEE methodologies to inform future programming.

## Methodology

This summary of lessons learned for the Escúchame project will answer two research questions:

1. What has been the experience of incorporating methodologies or approaches that address GBV (prevention, awareness, care) and the economic empowerment of women?
2. What was the result of involving men in the programming of Escúchame?

For question 1, the GBV component was already integrated into the Escúchame program through the original Reducing Barriers for Entrepreneurs in Honduras and El Salvador (RBI) program funded by the United States Department of State Secretary’s Office of Global Women’s Issues. Through RBI, there was an already-established relationship between CuéntaNos and ODEF. RLRB education also included information about GBV and the CuéntaNos service. Given the lessons from integrating GBV in the RBI project and some additional experiences gained during the Escúchame project, the Escúchame team partially answers this learning question. For question 2, we focused on the experience of engaging men in IHDs.

This summary uses the Escúchame baseline, the final report of the RBI project, eight focus groups with IHD participants (four groups with women and four groups with men; 24 participants in total), and one focus group with ODEF IHD facilitators as resources to inform the lessons learned.

## Findings

### ***Gender-based Violence***

#### Introduction

Addressing GBV was part of RBI’s original design since RBI had a mandate of integrating GBV with WEE. The relationship between WEE and GBV had already been established through an evidence review Grameen had previously developed along with a barrier assessment conducted for the RBI project. Grameen developed the RLRB modules to introduce the forms of GBV, to promote the importance of having an emergency plan in case of GBV, and to inform ODEF’s clients of CuéntaNos as a service they could access if they needed support as a result of GBV, or other types of psychosocial support. The CuéntaNos team was also invited to conduct a training with ODEF frontline staff members and a select number of clients to raise awareness of how to access and use the platform. Given the same frontline staff facilitated RLRB sessions for RBI and Escúchame, their reflections on this integration have carried over into the Escúchame project.

## Findings

Key findings from the RBI final evaluation found that through the engagement with ODEF frontline staff and engagement in RLRB, ODEF client knowledge of CuéntaNos grew and was greater than that of a comparison group who did not receive RLRB. The sessions on GBV, for some female clients, was a moment of recognizing their own abuse as they were not aware that the verbal, emotional or economic mistreatment was a form of GBV. One client shared, *“The training helped us to observe behaviors that, at first glance, are not perceived as an act of abuse, because they are so used to it that it seems normal.”* In fact, during the interview with ODEF IHD facilitators, one facilitator shared an experience he had during the GBV session. A group of 5 clients who were also friends were the participants. He shared, *“We began touching on the topic of GBV. And it was awkward at first because one of them [the clients] was experiencing violence. When this was discussed, the other four clients laughed as they were very close friends and well known to each other. They laughed at her, as if to say well ‘eh, is this happening to you then?’ So it was a little complicated and a little tense at the moment, but it was where they realized that one person was [experiencing violence] from her husband, perhaps not physical violence, but it was seen as a type of psychological or emotional violence... She was receiving this type of violence, maybe she didn't realize it, but at the end of the discussion...the conclusion of the five women was that all five were receiving violence in one of these areas. They said that there was perhaps mistreatment, rude words, and intimidation, threats. It was then no longer just one client, but there were five...and in the end they talked about the CuéntaNos.org page, where they could receive advice.”*

The Escúchame baseline, however, found little measurable justifications for GBV nor economic coercion, a focus of the evaluation, despite national statistics indicating high levels of GBV. Yet, when detected, women, particularly rural and older women, justified violence more than men. While there are questions that will be explored in the endline evaluation regarding the measurement in economic coercion, it may be that female microfinance clients are not the most likely to experience economic coercion and have already overcome or they have never experienced GBV.

The focus groups with Escúchame female clients reflected on the GBV sessions in RLRB and found mixed results. Some of the FGD participants remembered the sessions and others didn't. Among those who did, one remembered and valued information on CuéntaNos and while another reflected that she learned that GBV was not just physical abuse, but could be emotional abuse and that she had shared information with her neighbors and family.

## Recommendations

Key lessons gained from integrating GBV into RBI and the continuation of this integration into Escúchame include:

- **Prior to any work in GBV, especially for non-GBV actors, address frontline staff's attitudes towards gender and power.** Prior to the implementation of RLRB, ODEF management and frontline staff were trained in Grameen's Gender, Conflict and Power Dynamics (GCPD) workshop, which was a critical precursor to staff's sensitization on unconscious bias, stereotypes and how these can lead to GBV. This finding has also been documented in other projects where Grameen has worked to integrate GBV and WEE.
- **Develop the technical expertise and build confidence of frontline staff prior to implementing content on GBV.** While the GCPD workshop above was an important starting point, and the RLRB training of trainers sessions sought to build frontline staff capacity to safely and effectively deliver the RLRB GBV sessions, it did not fully equip frontline staff to confidently address GBV. Frontline staff voiced discomfort not fully understanding what they could say, not say, do, or not do if someone admitted they were experiencing GBV. While they were equipped to share information on CuéntaNos, they were not fully equipped to support survivors in the moment of the reveal. As one frontline staff person shared, *“At first it was a challenge. As frontline staff, it becomes more comfortable to talk about other topics. We did not know about GBV nor how to relate to it. It has been a learned experience.”*

- **Carefully sequence the introduction of GBV into project activities to allow for time to build trust and confidence between the frontline staff and the participants.** ODEF facilitators (and those from RBI's other two partners in El Salvador as well) found they needed to reorder RLRB sessions and put the topics on gender and GBV towards the end to allow them to build a relationship with the participant on neutral and common ground, which resulted in starting with RLRB sessions on financial and business literacy. This lesson was captured in this [blog](#).
- **Develop deep linkages with GBV providers, such as CuéntaNos, and other psychosocial support.** While introductions and linkages were established between ODEF and CuéntaNos, frontline staff felt they could use more reinforcement on GBV and CuéntaNos to ensure they could be effective in sharing information with their clients. It was also during one of the IHDs when a couple shared that someone within their household was in a relationship with a woman who had been violated. In this moment, the facilitators realized they needed to have information at the ready on GBV so that they could respond in the moment and inform clients of services they could consider.
- **Provide “passive” information on GBV.** While active sharing of information on GBV during RLRB sessions and through the linkages to CuéntaNos are needed, flyers and more passive forms of information sharing are also needed both to protect privacy of a survivor and to accommodate clients who are not engaged in the education or who do not have strong network connectivity to access the CuéntaNos platform. As during the interview with the IHD facilitators, one facilitator shared that during one of the RLRB sessions, a woman was very uncomfortable asking for the CuéntaNos WhatsApp number after the session. It was clear to the facilitator that she was worried what others might be thinking as she asked for more information. She indicated she had a “neighbor” experiencing violence and she wanted to share the information with her.

## Male Engagement

### Introduction

A new component added to the Escúchame project was IHDs, where the spouses of 50 of the female clients who had already participated in RLRB were invited to a series of three dialogues that focused on time use (through use of a 24-hour clock methodology), active listening, and problem solving. None of the dialogues directly addressed GBV. After young women had participated in RLRB, 50 of them were purposefully selected to participate, relying heavily on the facilitators' knowledge of the clients' situations and the clients' consent to engage her spouse in the dialogues. Given early lessons from RBI, Grameen and ODEF wanted to engage clients and their spouses in dialogue as it was clear from experience that spouses and other household gatekeepers can limit the success of a woman's business if she cannot find a way to negotiate her time use or does not receive support for household chores and caretaking responsibilities. Prior [research](#) Grameen conducted in Guatemala found that women with very young children, in particular, may spend no more than 2-3 hours a day in her business to accommodate her household responsibilities. Therefore, the IHDs were designed to strengthen a couple's ability to collaboratively work towards helping each other pursue an “ideal” day, improve household communication (as a preventive measure to conflict and in worst cases, GBV), and solve household challenges.

To describe the findings of engaging the male spouses in the IHDs, interviews with IHD facilitators and four focus groups with ODEF female clients and four with their spouses were conducted and notes from ongoing programmatic conversations occurring after the majority of clients had completed a dialogue were consulted.

### Findings

**During implementation of RBI, the endline evaluation found that women valued men's participation in the RLRB sessions.** While the sessions were designed more for women (and the main protagonist in the videos is a woman), women appreciated hearing men's perspectives and experiences on the business and financial issues they discussed. Men also gained value for the RLRB sessions and appreciated the new ideas they gained, particularly around finances and business practices.

**The invitation matters.** During some of the first IHDs, one ODEF branch office developed a creative and formal invitation for the couples, in the style of a wedding invitation. Staff shared they felt that the clients and their partners valued the formality and took the invitation quite seriously. In addition, these invitations were hand-delivered to the couples so that ODEF staff could also make the invitation personal. Clients noted their appreciation of the hand-delivery. Many of the participants expressed their excitement to participate, but as one group shared, *“we didn’t know if we were going to like the dialogues. At the beginning, we were not very convinced as we didn’t fully understand the invitation.”* Another group of female clients shared they were a little bit anxious about their partners’ involvement, *“when we received the invitation to participate, we were wondering if our partners would be personally comfortable. We were anxious but it also sounded interesting.”*

**Difficulty in scheduling the IHDs.** To date, one of the greatest challenges has been scheduling the dialogues at a time where the couple can both attend as this is a stipulation of the IHDs. In a few cases, where multiple couples were grouped in a dialogue, if a client or her spouse could not attend, the dialogue went forward. In some cases, ODEF conducted IHDs with one couple if it was difficult to schedule multiple couples. Whenever possible, multiple couples were grouped into one dialogue. This had two benefits: to reduce costs (travel and facilitator time) and allow increased dialogue and reflection to occur when couples could engage with others on a given theme. The conversations were richer when there was more than one couple. The participants also noted the difficulty in scheduling; one group of female clients shared, *“The expectations of the dialogues were good; however, for the time we have to think about more.”*

**Women were a few leaps ahead of the men in terms of their readiness to engage in dialogue due to their prior participation in RLRB education.** Because the female clients had already been participating with ODEF in a series of educational sessions, they were already confident and ready to share during the dialogues. Facilitators noted men’s reservations towards participating, but recognized this might be the men’s first time to ever engage with ODEF. However, men’s comfort levels with the dialogues increased over time as they gained confidence and trust in the process.

**Dialogue 1—on time use—set the stage for productive dialogue.** While the ordering of the dialogues were not varied during the implementation, facilitators agreed that Dialogue 1 was a practical icebreaker and it started a conversation about workloads. While men most likely gained the most learning about how much work their wives are undertaking, men equally felt their wives appreciated their efforts towards household income, recognizing the difficulty of working in the hot sun all day, for example. Many of the participants noted appreciating learning about active listening and how they were practicing this within their home. As one man noted, the IHDs *“reminded us of things that we had stopped doing (like active listening).”*

**Couples—and the IHD facilitators—felt the dialogues provided practical skills for improving relationships.** During the interviews with the facilitators, they reflected how the dialogues had them inventory their own behaviors at home and some shared they started supporting their wives in activities at home, too. The facilitators were inspired by the conversations and changes they could see occurring during the IHDs. Some of the men shared that as a result of the dialogue, they better distributed household work, there was better communication and shared decision-making within the couple. One group of men shared, *“we feel excited to participate in a project that will help us in our daily lives.”* Another group of men shared that the biggest change for themselves was, their *“character. [They were] more considerate with their partner.”* The women agreed. One group of female clients shared that the dialogues have *“totally changed their partners since [they] take on roles related to our homes.”*



**Men’s engagement in the IHDs resulted in a reflection of their possible abusive behaviors directed at their wives.** While GBV was not directly addressed in the IHDs, facilitators compared the participation of men in RBI’s RLRB sessions with men participating in Escuchame’s dialogues. During RLRB participation, facilitators shared that they felt men did not see the relevance of GBV to them (it was perceived as a woman’s issue) and they had limited participation. However, without directly bringing up GBV, the men would bring up GBV when they recognized their behaviors during the sessions on active listening. During Dialogue 2 on active listening, a facilitator shared, *“we were differentiating debate and dialogue. A husband took notice and spoke with his wife, ‘when I left the farm and got home, I was a demon, right? I was hysterical, insulted everyone and then would go rest. So, now I arrive well, calm, relaxed, and with dialogue, I no longer argue. And I do thank you’, he says, ‘because you look at my age. I made that mistake. And, well, I have seen a change in myself. It was me who was making the mistake because of machismo itself. It was not visualized as gender-based violence.’ This person changed his attitude and had the courage to say it.”*

### Recommendations

- **Engage men in education sessions, too, prior to the dialogues.** Given women were also found to value men’s participation in the sessions and because facilitators recognized that men were less participatory in the dialogues at first, ODEF should consider providing RLRB to men and women alike, particularly as a precursor to couples participating in IHDs.
- **Consider different incentives that might help lower-income households balance the need to generate income with the time it takes to participate in a dialogue.** It was most difficult to schedule the IHDs due to men’s limited time availability and their prioritization of income generation. While ODEF committed to providing food and snacks during the meeting and placed the dialogues within the communities where they were occurring, matching these schedules for both ODEF facilitators and the participants was a challenge.
- **Ensure that men feel they are expected to benefit.** ODEF was intentional about ensuring that the dialogue participants felt that the dialogues were designed for them as a couple or as a household and it was not just for the female clients. This will require a change in the way participant engagement is conducted, particularly if something has already been designed for the women.
- **Don’t underestimate the importance of attitude and behavior change in staff.** As noted regarding the GCPD workshop in the section on GBV, to fully equip frontline staff with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they need to support others, they have to do their own homework, too. This may require building in more time to ensure frontline staff have the time, and the training, to facilitate these personal changes.

### Conclusions

Interestingly, ODEF had been implementing a piece of Dialogue 1 with their clients during RBI. This is also a session found in the GCPD workshop. Given men and women, but primarily women, were participating in RLRB, participating in a dialogue with someone outside of the household decision-making unit was still creating value. Men could see what women’s daily schedules looked like, and likewise women had a better understanding of men’s daily schedules. However, when engaging couples who make up the decision-making body of their own household, changes were more personal, accountability was built in, and change was being experienced. While ODEF Financiera and ODEF NGDO are working towards decisions to replicate the methodologies, engaging partners does not come without significant time, cost and coordination. These are considerations to continue to balance into the future.

