

The Omena Movement and the Power of Digitization in Addressing Emotional Abuse in Madagascar

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Abstract

This article explores the Omena Movement's use of digital tools to combat emotional abuse in Madagascar. Emotional abuse, often hidden by cultural norms, has severe impacts on the mental and physical health of Malagasy women and children. Founded by Francesca Raelison, the Omena Movement leverages social media to extend its reach, offer support, and foster a community of survivors and advocates. Despite challenges like internet access and digital literacy, Omena's digital initiatives have achieved significant milestones in awareness and education, aiming to break the cycle of abuse and contribute to sustainable development goals.

Introduction

In Madagascar, emotional abuse is often hidden in plain sight. Phrases like "You're too sensitive" or "It was just a joke" mask deeper psychological harm. This form of abuse includes constant belittling, criticism, insults, humiliation, gaslighting, and manipulation. These behaviors are deeply ingrained in Malagasy culture and are often overlooked or accepted as usual. The cycle of trauma caused by verbal abuse is passed down from generation to generation, with children witnessing and experiencing these harmful behaviors, only to perpetuate them as adults. Women and children are particularly vulnerable, bearing the brunt of this abuse in a society that devalues their voices and experiences. Domestic violence remains a significant issue in Madagascar, as demonstrated by a 2007 investigation in Antananarivo, which revealed that 35% of women experienced physical violence in the preceding year. Patriarchal norms reinforce power imbalances, making it difficult for victims to seek help or even recognize their experiences as abusive.ⁱ The normalization of such behaviors is perpetuated by a lack of awareness and resources to address emotional abuse. This intergenerational cycle of abuse is challenging to break, as the behaviors are often accepted as a part of daily life and cultural norms. The impact of this normalization is profound. Emotional abuse erodes a person's sense of identity, self-esteem, and mental health. For children, it sets a harmful precedent for their future relationships, creating a cycle of abuse that is hard to break. According to UNICEF, 84% of children in Madagascar have faced some form of psychological abuse at home.ⁱⁱ Additionally, nearly half of the population believes that spousal abuse is justified in certain situations. These statistics highlight the urgent need for intervention and education to change cultural attitudes and break the cycle of emotional abuse.

Omena's Origin and Evolution

Omena is a nonprofit organization that improves the emotional well-being of children and young adult survivors of emotional abuse in Madagascar by providing a trauma-informed, social-emotional intelligence program that fosters self-love, emotional self-awareness, and healthy relationships and drives positive, community-wide changes.

Omena came to be when its founder, Francesca Raulerson, shared her personal story of surviving emotional abuse. Her testimony and vision went viral, resonating with people from 13 countries, including Canada, Peru, France, Morocco, India, and China, and garnering over 100,000 interactions. This overwhelming response highlighted the widespread issue of emotional abuse and the desperate need for a supportive community. Francesca's vision for change organically created a community of survivors and advocates dedicated to breaking the cycle of emotional abuse.

From these humble beginnings, Omena has evolved into a structured organization with a clear mission: to equip children and young adults starting in the capital of Madagascar with the tools to recognize and combat emotional abuse. Francesca's leadership and the community's collective efforts have transformed Omena into a proactive force, focusing on preventive education and community support.

Omena's Approach

Omena's approach involves several key components:

1. **Educational Training and Community of Practice Sessions:** These sessions are held by our Trainor of Trainers to raise awareness about emotional abuse, teaching participants to identify the signs of abuse and understand its long-term psychological impacts. Providing a language to describe their experiences, Omena empowers individuals to articulate their feelings, self-regulate, and lead healthier relationships.
2. **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Schools:** The SEL curriculum, developed in collaboration with international organizations such as Educate2Empower and the Institute of Social Emotional Learning, teaches children about emotional literacy, healthy relationships, and self-regulation. Early intervention is crucial for breaking the cycle of abuse before it can take root in future generations.
3. **Community Support:** Omena creates safe spaces for survivors to share their experiences, heal, and support one another. These safe spaces are environments where individuals feel secure, respected, and free from judgment or harm. Omena operates primarily through educational programs and community initiatives rather than providing living spaces. We find communal spaces like parks, educators' homes, or public areas to

conduct our activities. This sense of community and validation is essential for recovery and resilience. Omena helps individuals rebuild self-esteem and develop healthier relationships by fostering a supportive environment and creating positive societal change.

Leveraging Digitalization For Outreach and Education

Omena's innovative use of digital tools has expanded its reach and impact. By embracing digitalization, Omena conducted online workshops and support groups starting during the pandemic, providing vital training and resources for those in need, regardless of location. For outreach, Omena uses social media, mainly Facebook, which is the most accessible and popular platform in Madagascar. Approximately 30% of the Malagasy population uses Facebook.ⁱⁱⁱ This platform is particularly effective for engaging youth and the Malagasy diaspora to raise awareness. Omena also uses Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, YouTube, and TikTok. Omena uses Zoom, Trello, WhatsApp, and mostly Messenger video calls for team meetings to facilitate everyone's access.

Omena values access, ensuring the community's needs align with the organization's means. Employing a storytelling strategy, Omena leverages the power of social media to create viral momentum and raise awareness about emotional abuse. Community members shared their experiences in videos, making a connection with the audience. Today, Omena has over 50,000 followers on social media, with 0.5% turning into school collaborators, providing opportunities to present training and spread awareness about emotional abuse's impact on mental health.^{iv}

Challenges and Solutions in Digital Implementation

Implementing digital tools in Madagascar presents challenges of poor internet access, low digital literacy, and infrastructural limitations. Omena initially considered developing an application for easier access to training, but it faced barriers. This led them to focus on Facebook and Messenger to attract an audience and provide in-person services. These platforms were chosen for their accessibility and familiarity with the local population, allowing Omena to maintain engagement and deliver its programs effectively.

Impact Metrics and Data-driven Insights

Specific metrics and data showcase the impact of Omena's digital initiatives. Since 2021, Omena has achieved significant milestones:

- 250 community educators were trained, reaching over 5,000 students in 15 different schools.
- 100% of these educators recommend the program where they have shown marked improvement in emotional regulation and relational skills, creating positive ripple effects in their communities.
- 98% report that Omena was the most transformative support they've received.
- 40% of educators have started new projects they were previously afraid to undertake, indicating increased self-esteem and confidence.

- Collaborated with 20+ organizations, and their online awareness campaign reached half a million engagements.

Sustainability and Long-term Goals

Omena's digital initiatives are designed for sustainability and long-term impact. Digital platforms enable Omena to run effective awareness campaigns and share information widely. Through social media, Omena reaches a broad audience, spreading knowledge about emotional abuse and its devastating consequences. These digital campaigns are essential for challenging cultural norms and sparking conversations about mental health and emotional well-being. Digital tools also facilitate data collection and feedback through a feedback loop via Google Forms or Zoom interviews after each session and at periodic intervals. This helps Omena refine its programs and measure their impact. By analyzing online engagement (number of likes, shares, comments) and responses, Omena can adapt its content strategies to meet audience needs. This data-driven approach ensures that Omena's efforts are effective and responsive to the evolving landscape of emotional abuse prevention.

Soon, Omena aims to develop and launch a mobile app that is accessible offline, making its resources even more accessible. The app will allow users to share their stories, find educational materials, and connect with support networks, helping Omena reach more people, especially in remote areas where access to traditional support services may be limited.

Integration with Broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Omena's work addresses specific United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by contributing to sustainable development. Specifically, addressing emotional abuse directly impacts mental health (SDG 3), provides quality education on emotional literacy (SDG 4), and promotes gender equality by empowering women and children to break the cycle of abuse (SDG 5).^v SDG 3 aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages. Omena contributes to this goal by providing education and support to recognize and address emotional abuse, ultimately improving mental health and emotional well-being. SDG 4 focuses on inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Omena's SEL curriculum and educational workshops align with this goal by equipping young people with essential life skills and emotional literacy. SDG 5 strives to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and by addressing the cultural norms that perpetuate emotional abuse and providing support to women and children, Omena actively works towards this goal.

Leveraging Generative AI for Organization Efficiency

Omena has also integrated AI into its operations to enhance efficiency. Each core team member had the privilege of participating in instructive AI training. This training has helped automate administrative tasks, allowing the team to focus more on providing in-person sessions. As a startup organization with limited resources and time constraints, such training helps Omena

operate more efficiently. By streamlining processes with AI, Omena can maximize its impact, ensuring that more time and resources are dedicated to supporting the community.

Testimonials

Testimonials from beneficiaries add a human element to the case study. Here are a few:

- "Omena has been a life-changing experience for me. I now have the tools to understand better and manage my emotions." - Sarah, Educator.
- "Through Omena's programs, I have gained confidence and started a community project that I had always been afraid to undertake." - John, Community Member.
- "Omena's support has helped me heal and rebuild my self-esteem. The sense of community has been invaluable." - Maria, Survivor.^{vi}

Final Thoughts

As Omena continues to innovate and adapt, it remains committed to breaking the cycle of emotional abuse and fostering a more empathetic and self-aware generation. Looking ahead, the organization aims to enhance its digital platform further, offering more comprehensive support and educational resources. These efforts will ensure Omena remains at the forefront of emotional abuse prevention, continually meeting the needs of its community.

Omena's journey demonstrates how leveraging digital tools and innovative strategies can significantly impact, even with limited resources. Other organizations can learn from Omena's experience and start by utilizing accessible platforms and storytelling to create community awareness and support. The key is to align resources with community needs and continuously adapt to overcome challenges. We encourage other nonprofits to reach out if you have any questions or need guidance; feel free to visit our website at www.omenamovement.org.

ⁱ Investigation into Domestic Violence in Antananarivo (ELVICA)," 2007.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3325061/>

ⁱⁱ UNICEF Madagascar, 2018 <https://www.unicef.org/madagascar/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Data Reportal, "Digital 2024 Global Overview Report," <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-global-overview-report/>.

^{iv} Omena Movement, 2024. <https://www.omenamovement.org/>.

^v UNICEF Madagascar, 2024 <https://www.unicef.org/madagascar/>.

^{vi} Omena Movement, 2024. <https://www.omenamovement.org/>.