

Omena Peer Education Bootcamp Training: An initiative to break the cycle of emotional abuse in Madagascar.

Madagascar

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<https://www.omenamovement.org/>

PART A. NARRATIVE REPORT

Omena's mission is to equip children with social and emotional intelligence tools, in hopes to build a more self-loving, self-aware, and empathic generation who ultimately foster healthy relationships and prevent abuse and violence in Madagascar.

When I grew up in Madagascar, my definition of abuse was limited: I only thought of abuse as physical and sexual abuse. When I worked as a Peer Educator in College, it was a turning point in my life — I learned about forms of hidden abuse, especially emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is characterized by name calling, yelling, intimidating, controlling, gaslighting (making the victim doubt his or her reality through manipulation), using the silent treatment to punish the victim or invalidate their emotions, threats, isolating the victim from their community, and manipulating (Bancroft, 2002).

This project started from a personal experience when I realized that during my childhood and early adulthood I grew up in an emotionally abusive household, but I didn't know it. I felt lonely. But I soon found out that I was not alone. According to the WHO, 1 billion children worldwide have experienced some type of emotional and psychological abuse in their household. According to UNICEF (2019), 80% of children in Madagascar had experienced emotional abuse. In my country, it's normal to walk down the street and see couples fight or parents yell at their children. Nobody says anything. Even those doing the yelling and the name-calling don't realize it is wrong - because that's just the way it has been. These behaviors are in plain sight but completely unseen. As there is no fundamental understanding of the concept of emotional abuse, the cycle continues. Studies show that emotional abuse is often the foundation of physical abuse, and there can be a decline in mental health and cognitive function, ultimately leading to generational trauma.

After years of extensive interviewing and research, I have discovered that even if emotional abuse exists everywhere in the world, in developing countries like mine, it is a cultural norm passed down from generation to generation. Emotional abuse is a systemic problem that undermines basic human rights, public health, and our economy by degrading our human capital. Omena takes the stance that emotional abuse is rooted in relational power imbalances that reflect racist, colonialist, colorist, and misogynistic dynamics that have persisted across geographies and generations. As long as abusers operate from these biases, abusive dynamics will persist.

Omena is the first project in Madagascar to address the serious impact emotional abuse has on individuals, the community, and the inherent culture in the country. This Summer, in partnership with a few local NGOs (Child Guide and Youth First), the Ministry of Health and Education in Madagascar, and thanks to Project for Peace's support, we led a 3-day Bootcamp training for our 65 volunteers (ages 18-25). Each session lasted approximately 6 hours with long breaks throughout the day. The peer education training took place in person in Antananarivo Madagascar from July 2022 to mid-August 2022. Participants were themselves survivors of emotional abuse and were recruited through word of mouth and through our online community. Prior to the training, participants were asked to complete a pre-survey to assess their understanding of emotional abuse, peer education, and Omena as an organization. On the first day of training, they learned

the mission and model for the Omena program and how to recognize signs and psychological outcomes of emotional abuse. An important component of our training involves teaching participants not only how to identify, but also how to respond to emotionally abusive behaviors. We incorporated elements from other psychosocial training that have been developed with our international partners, as well as learnings from our own experiences as survivors. In our approach, Malagasy youth do not simply have a seat at the table in eradicating emotional abuse; our youth are setting the table, drawing from their lived experiences to move our outreach, education, and activism in the best and most sustainable directions. On the second day, we provided them with the tools to use appropriate resources to effectively facilitate Omena teaching programs in schools, community organizations, and homes. The training culminated in a graduation ceremony where we highlighted and celebrated the engagement and commitment of our 65 newly trained educators.

Because of COVID restrictions still in place at the time, the only challenge that we faced was finding the right location for our participants; one that would allow for our capacity and activities. Thanks to our wonderful and resourceful community members, the rest of our planning went smoothly as soon as we secured the training location. Overall, the bootcamp training was a success.

In the past months, we have been working with Sul & Associates International, a professional measurement and evaluation corporation, who helped us create our culturally relevant assessment that is currently measuring our participant outcomes across four dimensions before and after one year of participating in Omena's programming:

- **awareness of the problem** (increase in participants who recognize signs of emotional abuse and can describe its consequences)
- **awareness of self** (increase in participants who recognize different emotional states and report using emotional regulation strategies)
- **change of attitude** (e increase in participants who understand how emotional trauma relates to cultural factors, systems of oppression, and colonialism)
- **change of behavior** (increase in participants who initiate and facilitate difficult conversations with others to set and maintain boundaries in their relationships)

There has never been a better time to teach young people what emotional abuse looks like. When we break the cycle of emotional abuse, we protect the mental health and safety of children, families, and communities and we promote healthy relationships and peace.

Moving forward, our educators will go through a community of practice that will allow them to use the tools for themselves first. We will survey them at six months and one year to establish longitudinal data on program effectiveness, identify program improvements, and measure their effectiveness as Peer Educators. Additionally, when participants meet for our monthly community of practice, they complete qualitative self-assessments that measure change over time. We use this data to continually refine our approach and objectives, and share high-level insights with local decision-makers (teachers, school officials and Ministries).

As we are looking to expand our training, we have just officialized a partnership with Projet Jeune Leader, a nonprofit organization in Madagascar, whose founder is a 2011 Project for Peace awardee. We will be training their educators in the next month.