Thoko Ngema is a rural woman living in Qomukuphila in KwaNibela. She is perhaps forty-eight years old, but no-one really knows her age because she has never had a birth certificate. She was one of eleven children.

Thoko’s father was not employed. He had eight wives, and he had thirty-five cows. Thoko was never allowed to go to school – because girls were needed to help at home, because her parents feared that a girl child would be attracted by boys at school, and because they thought she would get clever and leave the home. In their world, girls only need to learn housework, to take care of their husbands.

The result was that Thoko could never write her name, and she did not know anything about the world outside KwaNibela or family health or AIDS. She believed that if one of her family felt sick, they had been bewitched by a jealous person. But Thoko thought to herself
that she would make sure all her children went to school.

She lived in a homestead, as one of the two wives of a man who stays at home because he was retrenched from a mine. Thoko had seven children, and the other wife who is older has six children. In a day Thoko feeds children, washes clothes, cultivates maize in the rainy season, and sweeps her yard. She has a lot of discussions and arguments with the other wife.

When the adult literacy class started near her home, Thoko heard about it from a neighbor and decided to find out more. She enrolled and started learning to read and write. Three times a week for two hours she struggled – to write her name and to read simple sentences. But other things happened in class that were very exciting for Thoko. One day the facilitator started a lesson with a discussion about why so many people are dying. They looked at a big picture of four coffins in a church, with a pastor.

From this discussion and other discussions in the class Thoko learned about HIV and AIDS. While she was writing a sentence about AIDS she wondered if AIDS was the real reason for the recent death of the son of her husband’s other wife. The family had thought the young man had been bewitched, but now Thoko thought this may not be true. But she said nothing to anyone in the family.

In one lesson the facilitator told a story about a young girl married at the age of fourteen. The new husband, an old man, paid good lobola. The girl did not want him for a husband, but her family insisted. After three months the new bride ran away, back to her mother. But her father beat her badly and took her back to the husband. The women in the class nodded. “It has always been like that.” someone said angrily. “Now,” asked the facilitator “have you ever heard of human rights?”

The human rights topic was discussed in three lessons because the
learners had so much to say. They talked about every woman having the right to life and that it was difficult for a woman to take this right when the men deny that HIV and AIDS are real. They talked about a step-father who everyone knew was sleeping with his young step-daughter. Has he the right to do this? What is the mother’s responsibility? Can she divorce him because of this?

Then they talked about women’s rights in divorce and when the husband dies. The facilitator told them that the law in South Africa has now changed. Women married in South Africa in any kind of marriage now have the right to inherit from the late husband. The learners made a song about human rights for women, and they wrote it down in their books.

Thoko asked a question. “If I want to go to the clinic, I have to have my husband’s permission. Have I got the right to go to the clinic on my own?” Everyone said she has that right. But then an older woman said “But if you go without his permission, won’t he beat you?” Another woman said “If he beats you, go to the tribal court and report it!”

Thoko thought about this. She asked “But will the court listen to me? They are all men and they know my husband very well!”

One of her friends smiled. “My uncle is one of the indunas in the court. He is a community worker. He will make them listen!”

But Thoko shook her head.

The learners got very cross. “We will go with you to the tribal court and be your witnesses. But wait, you have not yet got into trouble!”

Thoko knew that she was going to get into trouble. She had had diarrhea for two months, and the clinic could not help. She thought she knew the problem. She wanted an HIV test and she did not want to tell her husband about it. She knew she must be brave.

A week later Thoko invited a friend to go with her to the clinic.
She did not tell her husband. Once in the clinic, she asked quietly for an HIV test. It was done. Thoko went home with a stone in her heart.

Nobody told her husband about the trip to the clinic. But a week later Thoko returned, full of fear, to hear the result of the test. The clinic sister was kind and she talked a lot about living with HIV. Thoko heard her voice over a long distance saying “I am afraid you have tested positive for HIV”.

It was a long way home, and Thoko had the stone in her heart and a storm in her stomach. She was so ashamed and frightened. She told nobody. She did not go to the literacy class for three weeks.

The literacy facilitator and one of Thoko’s friends came to visit her, to find out what was wrong. They were so kind that after crying hard, Thoko told them that she is HIV positive. They consoled her, saying that life begins when you are positive and she must come to class. Thoko agreed.

The next literacy lesson was about living positively with HIV and about ARVs (antiretroviral drugs). Thoko thought the lesson was for her. She listened carefully, and she read the poster. “We must have more green vegetables in our food at home. Vegetables will help me to be strong.” she thought. “And to get more vegetables, I must start a garden! The sister at the clinic said I do not need ARVs yet, but I can get them when I need them. Maybe I can do something about this sickness.”

Thoko went home feeling a bit better, but there was trouble at home. The other wife had told her husband that Thoko had been twice to the clinic without his knowledge.

Thoko’s husband was very angry. He shouted at Thoko and she had to tell him she had HIV. He beat her
and he beat her
and he beat her.

Then Thoko was sent back to her father’s home. But her parents had died and there was no-one to help her.

Thoko thought hard about human rights as she healed from her beating. She visited some friends from the literacy class. She told them her story.

After a few days, seven literacy learners and the literacy facilitator walked with Thoko to the tribal court. There Thoko complained about her husband. At first the tribal leaders laughed. One said “Woman, men have been beating their wives for many years. It is our culture. Why are you crying to us now?”

The learners began to sing. They sang a song about the importance of women and that women have rights. They should not be abused. It was a song made in one of the literacy lessons.

Then one of the men, the community worker, said his thoughts. He said things have changed. He said women can vote. They can now inherit property when their husbands die. He said women are important and they have rights as well.

Another man said that the man is the head of the family and the woman must do what he tells her. He said Thoko has annoyed her husband and the beating was right.

Many of the men discussed Thoko’s case. Then the learners sang their song about human rights again.

Thoko spoke again. The literacy facilitator spoke about the Constitution and human rights. In the end, the men agreed. No-one has the right to beat another person, for any reason at all. Thoko had the right to go to the clinic and the right to know her HIV status. They sent someone to call Thoko’s husband.

The husband came to hear the court’s decision. He was not happy. The court fined him a cow, which he had to give to the chief, and two
goats, which he must give to Thoko.

Thoko and her friends from the class walked home. They were all joyful at the results of the case.

The facilitator said “You see what happens when we work together?”

Thoko asked “My friends, will you help me make a vegetable garden?”

And someone said “Why don’t we make a vegetable garden big enough for all the learners? And then we can go and help each other …”

And one woman suggested they should think about all going for HIV tests to support Thoko and for them to know their status. The literacy facilitator promised that this would be the topic for the next lesson. And for the lesson after that, the learners will plan a large vegetable garden ….. and when the vegetables grow, we will have a lesson about running a small business …..

Thoko walked home with a lighter heart, thankful for her friends and her literacy class.