

OUR LIFE

· S T O R I E S ·





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INTRODUCTION

Project Empower is an NGO that is based in Durban, KwaZulu Natal. Project Empower organises women from rural areas and informal settlements into groups. In these groups we raise consciousness about the conditions of our lives as women and build our courage and capacity to create meaningful changes in our relationships, families and communities. In this process, we share experiences so that as women we can understand what we have in common, identify the causes of these experiences and discuss how to transform these experiences.

We wanted to collect women's stories so that these stories could be shared in groups to encourage women with similar experiences to break their silence. This booklet consists of the stories of women from Durban informal settlements where we have been working for up to five years.

Project Empower's aim was to give women an opportunity to write their own stories. This was not possible as many women could either not write at all or were not at all comfortable writing. So we encouraged women to tell their stories to one another, using drawings as a support. As women spoke, Project Empower documented the stories, with the consent of the participants. Women also gave their consent for their stories to be made into this booklet, but no one wanted their names or their photographs included.

It is very important to Project Empower that the stories should be available to women in the languages in which they were told. But we have translated the stories into English and printed a small number of English copies as well. We tried to keep the translated stories as close to the original meaning as possible.

The stories show that poor black women living in informal settlements experience all forms of discrimination because they are at the very bottom of the most unequal society in the world. The stories tell of lives burdened by hunger, abandonment, rape, HIV, migration, discrimination and violence. They speak of women living with little or no support from families, from their lovers and fathers of their own children and even from the government. Their abandonment is not just personal. They are also structurally abandoned. As Steve Biko said; "Material want is bad enough but coupled with spiritual poverty, it kills."

For many women, it was the first time to speak of these experiences and it was an emotional yet liberating experience. We would like to thank all the women who shared their stories with us. It is our hope that the stories will help other women, and men, in their journey to personal and social liberation.

BEING THE ELDEST GIRL CHILD **WAS DIFFICULT**

I was born in Bulwer. I was born in 1986. I started school in Bulwer. I was the eldest child and had four siblings. My parents separated when we were very young. I think I was about ten years old. My family was very poor. My parents' separation and unemployment made our lives even more difficult.

We grew up under very difficult circumstances. We walked to school and the school was very far. We could not pay school fees. In 1996 we moved from Bulwer to Durban because my mother got a job in Durban.

My mother got very sick. It got worse and I was compelled to stay at home and look after her. I dropped out of school when I was in grade eight. I eventually became the head of the household as I had the responsibility over my siblings. My mother was sick for a very long time. She was later diagnosed with AIDS. At that time it was too late to start the ARV treatment. It got worse when she was also diagnosed with tuberculosis (TB). During that time it was not easy to treat TB when patients had AIDS. My mother eventually died. Things were really hard as we did not have the money to bury her. We wanted to bury her back at home in Bulwer where all the family members were buried but because of financial constraints, we ended up burying her where we stayed.

After my mother's death things got even worse. I had to be a mother to my siblings. We managed to survive from the child social grant. Efforts to get foster care grants failed as we did not have our father's death certificate. The death certificate was the gateway to accessing the foster grant. Since we did not have it, we could not prove that we were orphans. As a result we did not qualify for the foster care grant.

“WE MANAGED TO SURVIVE FROM THE CHILD SOCIAL GRANT”

My aunt assisted me with registering for the disability grant. I could not see properly. And so I had to apply for a grant for my sight problem. Fortunately we succeeded and I am receiving the sight disability grant. Accessing that grant has made life easier for me and my family. My younger brothers had to drop out of school because of the situation at home. They started doing piece jobs to try and help me in the household. My two sisters are still in school. Although one sister fell pregnant in grade nine, she did not give up. I am looking after her child as she continues with school. I want them to be educated. Education is very important.

Not long after our mother's death, our father also died. We were not consulted when he was sick. We only heard that he also TB. He had not taken good care of himself and so he died.

The good thing is that before my mother died, we had an RDP house that was registered under her name. If we did not have a home, it would have been even tougher. Shelter is very important. In 2010 I also fell pregnant and expenses increased. The father of my child did not have a formal job and so we struggled raising my child.

Being an eldest girl child was difficult. I had to take care of everything at home. And also being born and growing up as an albino was another challenge. It made my life more complicated. In school the children used to tease and mock me because of the colour of my skin. It added to the fact that I was a young poor girl who was vulnerable to any kind of oppression. For school uniform and food, I got used to receiving handouts from children from well off families. Most people called me 'isishawa', a name that basically means being cursed. My birth was a punishment to my parents for anything they might have done or their elders did. They were made to suffer by giving birth to an 'isishawa'. The colour of my skin made me different and I did feel different. I believe that it influenced my decision of dropping out of school.

“IN SCHOOL THE CHILDREN USED TO TEASE AND MOCK ME BECAUSE OF THE COLOUR OF MY SKIN”

My dream is to see my siblings complete school and become successful. I want us to become a better family. Growing up under difficult circumstances molded me into the strong woman that I am today. I have learnt to persevere and face any challenge that comes my way. I have also learnt how to love and protect my own children and to strive for a better life for them at all times. I have learnt to be patient too. I have persevered in my intimate relationship despite the hardships that I have encountered. I have persevered because I want my child to grow up with both parents.

I do all I can to ensure that my siblings do not feel the emptiness of not having a mother. I want them to be happy like all the other children who have parents.

There is one thing that still breaks my heart. My community insults and bad mouths me to my fiancé. They ask him why he chose to marry an albino when there are so many 'normal' women out there. But what consoles me is that he defends me, and he told them that he fell in love with the person, and that is me. The colour of my skin has nothing to do with our love. We have a four year old son who is referred as being 'alright' as he is not an albino. I have never dated anyone before my fiancé because I did not trust men. It took him two years to convince me that he really loved me. He even went home and started with the negotiations to prove that he really loved me. Even though we do have minor problems and challenges in our relationship, I am happy that I found him.

I STILL WANT TO GO

BACK TO SCHOOL

My place of birth is Ndwedwe. I remember that my mother was struggling to secure a space for me in the neighboring schools as all schools refused to admit me. I was physically and mentally challenged. I was not able to go school anymore as no school was prepared to negotiate my admission with my mother. I still want to go back to school. It hurts to be denied my right to education. The problem is that I do not know which measures to take in order to start schooling.

On birth, life was complicated, so says my mother. She said when we were discharged from hospital, I was still a few days old. We were involved in a bus accident. Since that day I became disabled. My mother was also badly injured. Her right hand side was badly injured in a way that she was confined to a wheel chair for a long time but now she has fully recovered.

My disability has made my life very complicated in the community. People take disabled people for granted. They throw stones at disabled people. So people even abuse and violate me even when I am at home. One day my male neighbor arrived with the thugs and they wanted to rape me. I screamed for help but nobody came forward to assist me. I fought them off and resisted their demands. They eventually gave up and left but they were passing bad remarks, saying that they will come back to get me. When my mother got home from the clinic, I told her what had happened. She took me to the police station to open the case. They took a statement on what had happened and told us to keep the statement and produce it if anything similar ever happens to me again. Since then, nothing has happened.

Things are now better because my mother and sister are taking good care of me. They take turns and make sure that I am not left alone at home. I heard that my dad passed away when I was still a baby. I have two siblings and my mother is the bread winner. She does temporary jobs. I am also receiving a monthly disability grant. My mother takes very good care of me.

I do not have a boyfriend and I do not want one. Men take disabled people for granted. They say they love us and we know that that is not what they mean, they just want access to the disability grant that we receive. Young girls are involved with older men. I am still young and I have looked around me when young girls are infected with HIV at a very young age. In hospital when we go to get our medication, we get advice on how to take care of ourselves. They even advise us about sex. They tell us that if by any chance you engage in unsafe sex, you must hurry and go to the hospital to do the HIV bloods. Although I am not involved with anyone, I do go for HIV testing regularly. My health is important. Many guys have claimed to love me but I am not flattered because I know the hardship that my mother went through when she raised me. I do believe that when the time is right; my Mr Right will appear. It is also nice to hear that a virgin, untouched girl is getting married. My mother also gave me advice on choosing a right man. She told me that if a man says that he loves me, I must be careful because of my disability. Men want money and our vaginas only. Our parents are the ones who are mostly affected when boys hurt us. They leave us with children that they do not support, HIV and have to depend on our parents for everything. I do not want to disappoint my mother. She showed me love during difficult times and she raised me up.

GROWING UP WAS HARD AS MY MOTHER HAD **ABANDONED ME**

I was born in Durban. My mother had two children and my father had thirteen children from different women. Growing up was difficult as my mother abandoned me. She left me with an old woman when I was about only three months old. I was not even related to the old women that she dumped me with. I heard that she had gone to try and find a job.

From time to time my mother would come to check on me. She used to bring me clothes but seeing her did not make me happy because the life I led was not nice. The granny that I stayed with had a daughter who had a son who was almost my age. We used to go out and play together but we were raised and treated differently. I was discriminated against. One day we got back from playing in the afternoon, only the son was allowed back in the house. I was punished for coming home late and I was locked outside and spent the night on dark and the scary streets. Time passed and my life was hell. Some days were worse than others. I would go for days without food. Sometimes the daughter's son would invite me for food but when I got in the house I would discover that my dish was empty. They would sit and eat with his mother. I would then just leave them and go and play outside. I am not sure whether the granny that took me was aware of this abuse, but she never said a thing about it. I ended up spending a lot of time alone.

I continued going to school but dropped out of school in 1987 when the heavy rains struck the country. Another relative arrived and requested to take me with her. I then relocated to another area and life was much better with this new family. As time passed, things changed. My guardian, granny from Durban came to visit and discovered that I was not attending school. She insisted that I go back to school and I did. The children of the mother who adopted me became jealous of me. She eventually moved out of the house with her children leaving me at the hands of the grandfather. When I was eleven years old I decided to go back to Durban. I did not stay long and another relative arrived and requested to have me stay with her. Indeed I agreed. But when we got to her house her husband was not happy to have me in the house as he claimed that women are trouble makers. During that time I was dating someone. My boyfriend wanted to start with the negotiations, but my aunt refused. She said she was still going to consult with my granny. We waited but there was no response until we were tempted and we started engaging in sex. After some sometime, I realized that I missed my periods; it was obvious that I was pregnant. I told my aunt who became furious. She told me to leave the house as she was not prepared to take care of someone who was going to become a parent too. I packed my bags and moved in with my boyfriend. My boyfriend wanted to pay for the damages but the family refused and said he can only do that once I delivered the baby. I stayed for a while with my boyfriend and realized that staying with a man was not good. I decided to rent my own shack. I decided to break up with the father of my child because he started causing trouble. He started abusing me and also had many partners. Life was hectic. I started dating another guy. In between all the things that were happening in my life, I was trying to find my father. I heard rumors that he was working for another firm. I went to look for him. I was eighteen years old then. I was happy to find my father but I was disappointed by the first words he uttered when he saw me. He said he always known that I existed but he just did not care. All this time my mother did not come. I last saw her when I was eighteen. At that time, I was demanding that she tells me who my father was. I told her that I needed to know as I did not want to date my brothers not knowing that we are related. She got mad at me and said my father did not pay for damages and so

she was not prepared to tell me who my father is. Since that day I have never seen her again. I continued visiting my father. He tried his best to give all the love he should have given to me to my baby. But that did not make me feel any better. To date I am still hurt by the words he said when he first saw me. But I feel better because I spoke about how hurt I was by being rejected by him when he was still alive. I never went back to my father's place after the funeral. His brother spoke at the funeral and said my father was his last blood relative he was burying. He does not have anyone who he wishes to link up with. The message was very clear to me. It meant that he wanted nothing to do with me. Even when they do ritual ceremonies, they do not invite me. I have accepted that my shack is my home. I have no space in my life for relatives. I tried to stay with my step mother after the funeral. But she treated us very badly. She would use bad language and say I am the street child my mother left. She will not take my mother's responsibility and be a granny to my son. I left her house with my child. Her children were also making false accusations about me. They said I was after money that is why I came and stayed with my step mother. They also threatened to kill me if I did not leave.

In the midst of all that my child social grant was released - it had been months since I had last received it. With that money I managed to buy myself a two roomed shack. I stay with my child in my shack. I do have a boyfriend but we do not stay together because a while ago when we used to stay together he stole the money I was saving for stokvel. He did nothing with it other than buying alcohol. I was very angry and disappointed. We broke up for the whole year and I told him that if he wanted me back, he had to pay back all the money he took without my permission. And yes, he did pay back the money. But I told him that since I did not trust him anymore, we cannot stay under the same roof. We are still seeing each other but we do not stay together.

I decided to start selling food to the construction site employees to survive. All went well until a neighbor started a fight accusing me of putting my shack on her land. What was disturbing is that she already had an RDP house. The fight over the land was deep and took a while. She eventually accused me of witchcraft and bewitching her daughter who had allegedly died from AIDS. She spread rumors that I had bewitched her with the herbs that I had gotten from very far. Life became very difficult then as I had to leave my shack and squat in other people's houses for fear of being attacked. She had also given me a cut-off date of five days to take my things out of the shack as she was preparing to burn it down. I just became brave and told her that I was giving her ten days to burn it down. My priest intervened. He told her that she was making false accusations about me and she had to stop harassing me. Her children realized that she had made up all the stories and started talking to me. They always came to me for food. But still their mother does not talk to me. It was sad that the daughter that I had gotten closer died. I was scared to attend the funeral. I thought her mother will also accuse me of her death, but I eventually went. Nothing dramatic happened and I was happy that I had gone and paid my last respect to a friend.

I am unemployed and the child social grant is what brings us food on the table. I am loansharking some on my money to make an extra income. In 2006 I discovered that I was HIV positive. I had been in a relationship with my boyfriend for years. I decided to go have an HIV test after I had seen my boyfriend's ex who used to be chubby but who was getting thinner. My boyfriend told me that when they were still involved the condom busted so he thinks he must have been infected. I was so heartbroken but also so scared to go to the clinic for HIV testing. It took me some time to finally decide that I had to go and have an HIV test. When I got back from the clinic with my results I ripped them up as I did not want my step mother to find out. I did my HIV testing when I was visiting her. During that visit my boyfriend had another woman in his life. When I discovered that he was cheating, I got angry and stressed and I think from that stress my CD4 cell count dropped and I had to start taking the HIV treatment. The other confusing thing about him is that he tests negative every time he does his HIV testing but he does go to the clinic for regular checkups.

MY MOTHER GAVE ME AWAY TO AN OLD MAN - HE HAD PROMISED

TO PAY LOBOLA

I was born in Eshowe in 1978. I was raised by my mother as my father was working far from home. We only saw him once a year. I stayed with my extended family including my grandparents and uncles. My mother had six children and two children passed away. I grew up under the care of one of my sisters who was not staying at home.

She looked after us as my mother was working. She sometimes did not come back home. She stayed at work. My grandmother was not a very healthy person, she was usually sick. She eventually died. We somehow parted in a very horrible manner as we all were running for our lives when political fights broke out in our area. We all ran away but also found each other in Durban.

When the violence was over, we came together and decided to go back home. When we got home my uncle who was an IFP member died. It was sad when he died but he was accused of fueling violence in the area. He occupied a very important position within the ANC. My other uncles were IFP members. The IFP members came together with neighbouring Boers and planned to kill my uncles as the ANC was not accepted in the area. They ganged up to burn the five homes that had ANC members and our house was among those houses in the list. When they arrived at home my uncle had run away to hide somewhere. But they raided the whole area. The streets were full of every kind of police official you can think of. They suspected that one of my uncles supplied the ANC with homemade guns and that he was a key fighter in the ANC. He lived for a long time hiding from the IFP and the police eventually got hold of him and his friend. They were killed in a very brutal way. They used a very sharp object to kill them. This sharp object was shoved up their backside and they pulled all their insides out and they twisted their necks. That is the pain that has haunted me for the rest of my life.

After my uncle's death, the situation changed from bad to worse at home. My mother had to come back from work for funeral arrangements. She did not go back to work. Things were difficult as the family had to bury two people as my uncle was killed with a friend who had no family members in the area. They met through the struggle and they were both killed by the IFP and the police on the same day. And our family had to bury him as well. It was during that time that my mother started communicating with my father. She was requesting permission to take us with her and stay with the step father. My father did not like that and so he refused. So my mother left us in the hands of the family and went to Durban. She was gone for three months and came back to check on us. My father came back from Johannesburg to take care of all our school needs. My mother stayed with us. I continued with school and I used to go with my brother to and from school. We were very close. One day on our way back from home, we were halfway home. Two boys from the neighbourhood approached us. They started a conversation with us. They then told my brother to go home and leave me as they wanted to send me somewhere. I did not suspect anything as they were both from the neighbourhood, although our homes were not really close to each other but I knew them very well. That is why I was not scared when they told me to stay behind with them. They then showed me a house and they told me that I should accompany them as they wanted me to go in that house and call someone for them. Without hesitation we all went to that house. But what struck me is that only one guy went in. I stood at the gate with this older guy. Around the area there were sugar cane fields. We stood

on the road for a while. I had my school jacket tied around my waist and I was wearing a track pant. He eventually untied my track pant and covered my eyes with it and dragged me into the sugar cane field. I think he was in his early twenties. And I was only twelve years old. When we got into the sugar cane fields, he demanded that I sit down as he wanted to do something to me. I screamed but he pushed and pressed me on the ground. He took out a sharp object and tore my track pant and started raping me. When he was done, he whistled and the other guy appeared and also helped himself. When they were done they wanted to wipe me with my jacket. I told them not to worry, that I was going to that myself. I had some information on how to handle yourself after you've been raped. I stayed in the sugar cane field until it was dark. The incident occurred at midday. When they got out of the field, they ran away and I stared at them until they vanished. I was thinking whether to go back home or not. I was bleeding heavily and feeling dizzy. I started walking out of the field. When all those thoughts were rushing through my mind, a neighbour who was passing by called his son. They drove me home. When I got home they were all worried about me and my brother and the other neighbours had already started searching for me. But they did not find the guys who had taken me. I explained to my mother what had happened. She went and called the police who also went looking for the culprit but did not find them. The police then took me to the hospital and the doctor examined me and confirmed that I had been raped and the damage was really bad. The doctor asked me if I was going to lay charges or not. I said I was opening the case. It was difficult because the families were very close and one guy was the family relative. But I had no choice. I missed out in school as I stayed for a long time not going to school.

There was eventually a community meeting where I was asked whether I was continuing with the charges. I agreed and said that if I let this go, they will do it to other innocent girl children; they needed to suffer the consequences. They were eventually arrested. Things got really bad because the family got mad at me for having the relative arrested. After those talks, my mother sent me to stay with another teacher from school. In less than a week, my home was burnt down. It was obvious that it was me they wanted to kill as they burnt down the rondavel where the girls slept. They wanted to get rid of me as the witness. I could not continue with school. Things became really complicated and I could not concentrate at school. It was eventually discovered that my house was burnt and a relative was one of the suspects. Both suspects pleaded not guilty and they were out on bail. The guy who burnt my home was not arrested. I still go home but the neighbours still pass bad remarks when they see me. My mother took me to her sister's place. She found a place for us. We first stayed in a caravan until she managed to get her own shack. She then went back home to get all my other siblings and we all stayed together.

When we settled down I went back to school. I did not even complete a year in school as it was hard to concentrate. I had my childhood flashbacks. Where we stayed there was a male neighbour who used to invite me over to his house. She used to send his sister who was almost my age to come and call me. I did go to him as he was an old man, I respected him. One day he just grabbed and kissed me. I found myself responding to his action. I believe that he used some "muthi" to woo me. I was very young and I found myself involved with a man who was way older than me. I was only fourteen years old. No one knew or suspected anything. He used to buy me all the goodies. He will invite me to his house in the afternoons and we will have sex and he will send me home in the evening so that the elders will not suspect anything I managed to keep this a secret for a year. In December he told me that his brother passed on and he was compelled to take his wife as it was their culture. He could not let the lobola of his brother go to waste. He told me that he is prepared to make me his second wife. I refused. I broke up with him. I could not agree to that. He told me that he could not leave as he had already taken my virginity. I went away and I was torn. I was hurting and could not sleep on that day.

He followed me around the area. He ended up hunting me down with a spear. One day when he could not get me, he entered my house and demanded to speak to the elders. He told my mother that he loved me and he was prepared to make me his second wife. I refused. My mother forced me into agreeing. My mother was tempted and gave me away to this old man as he had promised to pay lobola for me. It was difficult to explain to my mother that I never loved this man. I had no idea how he had wooed me into the relationship. I ran out of words and I just gave it. I continued the relationship with him. Little did I know that I was going to fall pregnant? I had not even started menstruating when I got pregnant. When I was pregnant I became sick and when we went to the inlying, I was told that the first was bewitching me as she wanted her husband. She had heard that I was pregnant and she wanted to kill me and my baby. We went to the inyanga who gave us herbs and healed us from all the evil spirits. After these series of strange happenings in my life, my mother took me to the traditional healer who cleansed me and I was free from the muthis that this man had instilled in me. I then went straight to him and told him that I hated him and I did not need him in my life. We officially broke up and I started looking for piece jobs and I started all over again.

“SHE HAD HEARD I WAS PREGNANT AND SHE WANTED TO KILL ME AND MY BABY”

In grade nine, I dropped out of school. I decided that I will never date men. When my daughter was two years old, I went to work in Madadeni. I worked for a year. One month end I decided to drown my sorrows and got drunk. I then made my way to my room and I don't remember what happened then. The next thing I remembers was seeing people around me and I was half naked. I realized that I had had sex looking by the dirtiness on my thighs and my private part. I think they put something on my glass as to make me pass out. I tried to ask around about how it happened that I ended up like that. People said they did not see anything, they just found me lying naked in my house. I started screaming and made my way to the bathroom. That is when I came across the body of a naked man, fast asleep behind my couch. I did not ask much, I hit him so hard. I say blood streaming from his body. The crowd also came around and beat him until he was dead. The community knew the guy. He was known for rapping a number of women around the area. I was told to leave the area to be safe from the police and his family people. I indeed fled the area, not knowing that I was pregnant with this man's baby. I have recently received a call from his family wanting me to bring the baby for the visit. I cannot do that as I did not give man consent to have sex with me.

I am currently dating a woman. But she left me when I lost my job. But now she is back because I got my job back. She helps look after my children and I support her in every way I can. Things are not too great between us as I cheated on her and she left me and went back home. I am trying to win her back but it's hard because her parents do not trust me anymore. I do hope that things will work out fine as I really want her back in my life.

Participating in the consciousness raising discussion has helped me open up and face the reality. I have relieved me and my heart is lighter now that I know that I can talk with other women.

WE SURVIVED ON THE **CHILD SOCIAL GRANT**

I was born in the Eastern Cape. I have two siblings. I grew up staying with my father and the children from the other mother. Our household was divided into two as my father had two wives. On the other house lived an older wife with her children and I lived with my father and uncles. My mother left me in the hands of my grandmother when I was still a baby.

My grandmother died when I was a baby, I do not even know when. When I thought I was old enough I started looking for my mother. I have heard that she had come to look for me but my father has refused to hand me over. I think I was about thirteen years old when I heard another women mentioning that my mother had come looking for me in another village not very far from where I stayed. I went looking for her and when I got to that village I was told that she had left for Johannesburg. I stayed with her sister whom I found in that village and Christmas time was drawing nearer, I did not wait very long for her arrival. I then got to know her. I started school in my mother's village. My mother decided not to go back to Johannesburg. She already had two other kids. I asked her why she abandoned me. She told me she did not lead a healthy life when she was staying with my father. My father used to beat her up so badly. She had to escape from that situation and of course she could not take me with her to a place she also did not know. She only knew a friend and she could not bring a baby along as she was jobless. She told me that is why she left me with the relatives she trusted. She took me to my father's house and she knew they will take good care of me. There was no way she could have taken her with me. She could not go back to her home because the elders would have sent her back to her marriage and she was going to be told to be a woman enough and persevere. The only way was to escape. She had a friend in Johannesburg but she could not bring a baby with her to a friend's place whilst she did not have a job. When her life was stable in Johannesburg, she did come back to get me but my father did not allow her to take me with her.

Life was not as good as I have imagined. I felt like she was abusing me. I did not feel the motherly love that I had expected. It felt like she was more attached to her other children that she had been staying with. She would beat me hard. I continued to stay. I eventually decided to take frequent breaks from this situation. I visited my father often. My mother left for Johannesburg again and she used to send us money. Eventually my father died. A message was sent to my mother and she did come back to mourn for my father. I continued with school. It was very challenging as school was very far. I stayed with my mother. She did not give me money for bus fare but she would give money to her other children. Another sibling from my father's side invited me to stay with her. Her house was closer to the school. We stayed together. Life was hard. I went to school although most of the times I went to bed without food. I did some piece jobs during school holidays. I decide to drop out of school when I was in grade eleven. Then the company that I worked for closed. Life became tough as I was unemployed. I struggled. My mother's cousin came to my

rescue. I worked for her in Umtata. I helped her in the house and I looked after her children and I cleaned the house. When things were fine, I fell pregnant. Whilst I was still dealing with the pregnancy shock, I was hit by the news that mother was very ill. I had to go back home and look after her. I looked after her but she unfortunately passed on. My mother died from TB. After her death I stayed with my aunt. My brother went to Johannesburg to try and find work. Things got really bad. My aunt started saying bad things about us. She used to say she was not responsible for our mother's death. So we should not be her responsibility. On top of that, my sister got pregnant.

My friend hooked me up with a store manager and I worked at the shop, earning R150.00 a week. The shop owner provided me with a place to sleep and food. I would send R100 home and I would spend R50 on my needs. I gave up and stopped working at the shop. I looked for another place to stay and I found another job. I then went back home to get my child and she stayed with me. I used the child social grant to pay for her school fees and other needs. Life was tough. I had to send money at home as they were still struggling. My sister got pregnant with a second child. I did not stop to send them money. My brother returned from Johannesburg and he did not find a job. I was now compelled to send money to both of them. Things got a little better as I received handouts where I was working. I managed to send all those second hand clothes home.

“I USED THE CHILD SOCIAL GRANT TO PAY FOR HER SCHOOL FEES”

I learned that my aunt was still a problem. Her abusive treatment towards them did not stop. She would demand money and then misuse the money I sent. Fortunately my brother managed to find a job in Durban. There was weight lifted off my shoulders. But my sister got pregnant with a third child. She registered for the child social grant and things are better for me. Last year, I visited them at home but I was not well. My arm was painful. I could not work and so I was unemployed. We survived on the child social grant. I did go to the doctor but I did not feel any better. I developed shingles. To date I can feel the pain in my arm and it's still aching. I went to the clinic and I was diagnosed with TB. I am unemployed. I get food and emotional support from Abahlali Basemjondolo. They provide me with food. I am just worried because my family wants me to come back to the Eastern Cape but I don't want to back home as I think things could only get worse.

LIFE WITHOUT A MOTHER **WAS TOUGH...**

I was born in Richards Bay. There were four of us and one passed on. Growing up was hard. I stayed with my mother, my mother's sister, my grandmother and siblings. We were very poor. My mother and grandmother worked as domestic workers and they kept the family going. My mother was retrenched. My grandmother continued to sustain the family.

But it turned out that my grandmother had cervical cancer. She could not work. Some days we could go to bed without food. My mother's sister went out looking for a job. She finally got a job with the Municipality and things got better at home. My mother started getting sick when she was pregnant with the last born brother. She was very sick but she managed to give birth to a healthy child. My mother had HIV and she eventually died. My brother was ten years old.

Life without a mother was difficult. My aunt changed. We used to fight with each other. I decided to leave the house. I already had two children when I left home. When I was pregnant with the first child I discovered that I was HIV positive. When I was in labour I forgot to take my nevirapine. Unfortunately my baby got infected with HIV. My baby got very sick and I had to stay in hospital for three years as he needed close medical attention. The challenge was how the baby was growing. He looked younger than his actual age. He started baby steps when he was two years old. And we were discharged from hospital. When we got home, I discovered that I was pregnant with the second child. The problems started all over again. They would insult me about my HIV status. I was hard hearted. I wanted my aunt to feel suffer. I wanted to pay revenge because she was the one who insulted me the most. I decided to take her social grant card and withdraw all the money from her account. She realized it could only be me who would be able to do that. She chased me out of the house and I left to rent a shack. I stayed with my second child. The first born is her responsibility, the very same aunt that I was fighting with. She told me that she would not let the child suffer. My problem is that I hate myself for making my child sick. It was my negligence. I still hate and blame myself for not following all the clinic protocols when I was pregnant. If I was responsible and did everything according to the clinic's advice, my baby would not have contracted HIV. I am still angry at myself. And I cannot bear looking at that child.

I broke up with my boyfriend as he was dating many women at the same time. I left him. Now I am realizing that I have bad luck with men. Things tend to go well if we do not have a child. Once I become pregnant, men leave me. It hurts. I have a boyfriend now

I am now on ARV treatment but experiencing bad side effect of skin irritation, rash and sores. I do feel a little bit better now. When I started the medication it was worse than I am now. I am trying to forgive and forget my aunt for all the insults but I do not seem to be able to. I regret fighting with her. I know she is like my mother and I should respect her but she broke my trust and confidentiality. I hate her for disclosing on my behalf without my consent. I am now angry and depressed. I made bad decisions. I regret everything. I still do not have the guts to apologize. I am still trying to get into terms with what happened.

I dropped out of school when I was in grade eleven. There was no special reason to dropout. It was peer pressure. I misused the chance I had. I still wish to go back to school but I do not think that's ideal since I now have the children.

LOSING BOTH PARENTS IN A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME

WAS PAINFUL

I was born in Durban. My mother had four children. My father had eight children from another wife. My father had two wives. My mother was the second wife. Life was good when both my parents were working. We got everything we wanted. In 1993 my mother gave birth to another child and so she took me to the other wife as she could not look after the two of us.

I stayed in the Eastern Cape with my father's older wife. At first, I felt welcomed. I was still a child and I would pee myself at night. As a result I had to sleep on the floor with their children who suffered from the same weakness as mine. I think I was about five years when I woke up in the middle of the night to discover that the elder brother had placed his penis on my thighs. He did not sleep on the floor as he was older than us. I jumped and ran to bed to sleep with his mother who also started fingering me. I then went and sat on the couch for the whole night. I was too scared to fall asleep. I was scared of the dark and after that I had sleepless nights. After a few days my mother arrived in the Eastern Cape. She had come to check on me and visit the family. She stayed for a few days but when she told me that she was leaving, I clung on to her clothes. I did not let go. I told her that I was not staying behind. I was too scared to tell her what had happened. She did not ask too many questions, she allowed me to go back to Durban with her and I was happy.

I have never told this story to anyone, even to my mother. I did not know how she was she going to react when she heard this story. When we arrived in Durban, I started going to school. I never went back to the Eastern Cape. My father's wife would come and visit us in Durban but I just ignored her. She passed away and I did not feel anything. I hated her and I hated even more when she was dead. I still never told anybody about what she did to me. Shortly after her first wife's death, my father lost his job. My mother became the bread winner. My father started drinking heavily. He became a drunkard. My father started hanging out with bad friends and he started sleeping around. It was the beginning of trouble at home especially between my mother and dad. My father started beating my mother up. He also abused us but he became too hard on my mother. One day he hit her so hard that her front teeth fell off.

Eventually both my mother and father started getting sick. My father recovered but my mother got worse and she died. Shortly after my mother's death, my dad also got sick and died. It was a difficult year. Losing both my parents in a short space of time was painful.

Life was tough. My mother stayed at the mortuary for two weeks as there was no money to bury her. I sat on the candles mourning for her as I was the eldest at home. The arrival of my uncle made things better. He put some money together and he buried his sister. Immediately after my mother's funeral, he took my two siblings with him and I stayed at home with my sister until December as we had to complete our grades in school. We stayed with our step sister and we left for the Eastern Cape in December. We stayed with my other uncle. He worked for SAPS and he usually was not home as he worked far from home. We stayed with his wife. She was evil. She started abusing us. She did not give us food. She woke us up in the early hours of the morning and made us work hard in the fields, fetch water and do the washing. She only gave food once, at sunset. She used give her children food and their food was different from what she gave us. Mid-year, she told me to stop

going to school. She told me that I did not have to school. She stopped giving me bus fare as I refused to stop going to school. I had to walk a very long distance before I reached school and coming back home was even harder. I got home when it was dark. I had a group that I studied with. Whenever I went to study, my uncle's wife would call him and lie and said I have gone playing or roaming the streets. My uncle did not request any clarification, he would beat me so hard using an electricity cord. One day he hit me so hard that it was painful to walk or pee for two week. I was in so much pain. But we continued and stayed despite all the hardship. One day a neighbour invited us to their daughter's birthday party. She called my uncle and told him that we were not home. In a blink of an eye I saw a police van pulling up by our house. I knew that he was going to kill us. I was very scared of him and I could not take any more of his beatings. We decided, with my two cousins, to commit suicide. We took my brother's ARV treatment tablets, rattex, paraffin and his TB medications. We used paraffin to swallow all this mixture. We do not remember what happened after that. I remember that I woke up at the hospital and we had drips and oxygen masks. Fortunately, nobody died. They managed to flush all the toxic stuff we drank and we were discharged. We were taken to the welfare and had to attend a few sessions with my uncle aunt and uncle. After that incident, my uncle never made an attempt to beat us again.

My aunt continued to abuse us. One of her children got burnt by mistake. She was very furious and wanted revenge. She boiled water and while it was still boiling, she poured it over my younger brother's tummy and said she wanted him to feel the pain of being burnt. To date my brother has that scar and he did not get any medical help. Life became worse. We decided to escape and went where my father's family resided. We did escape during the night and walked to my father's place. We stayed with the wife of my father's brother. His wife she was very loving, caring and good to us. I continued with my studies but I failed as I struggled with Xhosa language. I requested that she gives me permission to come back to Durban and continue with my studies as studying in the Eastern Cape was difficult for me. She agreed. I went back to Durban. When I got into grade ten, I fell pregnant. My boyfriend rejected me. He said it was not possible to fall pregnant when having sex for the first time, so it was not his baby. I opted for an abortion as there was no way I was going to be able to sustain the baby without a father. And my mother back in the Eastern Cape had told me that if anyone got pregnant, they would be forced to get out for school and raise their baby as she was not prepared to take on that responsibility. I got somebody who hooked me up with Marie Stopes and aborted. When he realized that I was not pregnant, he came to me to demand his baby. I told him that I had done the abortion as he rejected me. He said he was joking. He wanted to be sure that I was not sharing him with anyone. I told him he was too late. We broke up. I got involved with somebody else. I fell pregnant again when I was in matric. I decided to keep that baby. I went to the clinic for antenatal care and I was diagnosed with HIV. It was even harder as my CD4 cell count was also very low. I immediately started taking ARV treatment. I gave birth to a healthy baby as I followed and took all the advice from the health care professionals. My baby is HIV negative. I had to break the bad news to my partner who was very depressed but he did go for an HIV test. He also discovered that he was HIV positive. But his body is still strong and he is not yet on ARV treatment.

At the beginning of the year, 2013, I heard that my step brother who tried to rape me died from AIDS related sickness. I heard that he had defaulted and developed resistance to other ARV drugs. I hated him with all my heart; I could not even go to his funeral. I was actually glad that he got sick and died. I enjoyed looking at him suffer when he was sick.

To date our life at home is difficult. My younger brother still stayed at the Eastern Cape with my aunt. All is well and they get along very well. I stay with my two sisters. Life is tough but we work hard to make sure that we do not go to bed with empty stomachs. I have a temporary job. I work two days a week and I earn R100 a day. My other sister was lucky enough to get a bursary and so she is doing computer sciences. My younger sister is still doing grade ten.

THE PROBLEM IN THAT RELATIONSHIP **WAS VIOLENCE...**

I am from Mthwalume. We left Mthwalume eight years ago and then my mother and father had already broken up. My mother had started drinking and she would fight with my dad. My father took us to the Place of Safety. We believe that our father paid some fee for this institution for us to be able to stay and also go to school. I think that he paid because we were not orphans. But we had no one to look after us when my father was at work. We grew up staying at the Place of Safety.

Our father will visit us every month. After five years my father and mother came to get us. I believe that they worked out their problems. We went and stayed with our mother. When we were at the place of safety we were told that our mother had died. We only discovered when they came to get us that our mother was still alive. We stayed together and my mother started getting sick. She had TB. She eventually died in 2001. Life had to go on, we hardly knew her. In 2006 when I was doing grade eight, I fell pregnant. After I gave birth to my baby, my aunt, whom I was staying with, told me that I had to drop out of school and raise my baby. I stayed at home and looked after my baby. The father of the baby did not give any support. Whenever I asked him to support in anyway, he will say that the child social grant is available to anyone.

At the beginning of 2010, I visited my boyfriend. We had a fight and I got very angry and I left his house at the very early hours of the morning. It was very dark when I left his house. On the road I came across a man who demanded that I give him a cellphone and money. I told him that I did not have that. He said I was lying. He came close to me and started to search my body. He started caressing me and dragged me to the side of the road. There were old walls. And on the floor he had laid bed sheets and I thought this is where he performed his dirty deeds. He started raping me and he then let me go. When I walked out of those walls, another man who was not far from the walls said, you also have been in the mystery house. It was clear that in this area it was a known thing that women got raped in those walls.

I went past the police station but I was too scared to walk in and open the case. I did not see the face of the perpetrator and so I thought there was no point in trying to lay charges against somebody I did not know. I arrived at home and I told my boyfriend what had happened to me. He responded with a very cold voice and said what I expected when I walked through the streets during that time of the night. I got what I wanted. I was so hurt and I dumped him.

I got involved with another guy. The problem in that relationship was violence. He used to beat me up so badly. He was also jealous and always accused me of dating other men. One day he hit me so hard that I fainted. In 2011 he struck me hard with a wooden stick on my head. He apologised. Last year I spent Christmas in hospital. He knocked me with a copper pipe. I was badly injured. I opened a case against

him and he is out on bail. We are still attending the case. He still continues to apologise. I am not prepared to accept his apology. I have realized that he will end up killing me. Another thing, this beating saga has affected my child. The last time my boyfriend beat me, he locked my child outside of the house whilst he was beating me inside. My child tells that story to anyone. I now realize that he was traumatized. He is also the state witness as he saw him when he was beating me up. My child is currently attending sessions with the child welfare unit and he is also seeing a psychologist.

“HE WAS ALSO JEALOUS AND ALWAYS ACCUSED ME OF DATING OTHER MEN”

My life is not as tough as that of my peers. My father still pays maintenance for us. Every month end he deposits R800 for me and my two other siblings. But the other sister went missing. We heard that she is staying with some man around the area. We also heard that she is so sick and weak, he cannot even walk. But the problem is that she does not want to come back home.

I WAS ONLY FOURTEEN YEARS OLD WHEN I GOT PREGNANT

I was born in 1987 in Eastern Cape. Upon my birth, my mother and father took their separate ways. My father took another wife. That's when life started becoming difficult. It was the beginning of my abused life. I also dropped out of school. My step mother was very abusive and my father would listen to what she told him. They would sometimes gang up and beat me for something I had not done. Sometimes they would even chase me out of the house and I will sleep outside. The neighbours knew about my hardship. They tried to intervene but they failed.

One day my parents left me alone at home. Whilst they were gone, two men who had their faces covered broke inside the house and raped me repeatedly taking turns. My parents only returned at home the next day when my neighbours had already taken me to the hospital. But even after that, my parents showed no remorse. I continued staying with them. A caring neighbour would take me to the hospital without them knowing for checkups. One day she requested that we go to the hospital although I had no idea why she was taking me to the hospital. I however gave and went with her only to discover that I had fallen pregnant when I was raped. I was only fourteen years old and I had not even started menstruating. When I discovered that I was pregnant, life got worse. My parents starved me; I would get food from the neighbours. Life was painful and hard. I then heard that my mother was in the neighbourhood and she had come to get me. And it was as I had heard, she told me to pack my bags and we escaped at night. She did not even tell my father. We went to Durban. When we got to Durban, life was not easy. My mother was unemployed, we did not have a place to stay and I was pregnant. We managed to get a shack to rent. We did not have food. We would ask our neighbours to hand over whatever they had and that is how we survived.

My delivery dates drew nearer and I was admitted to hospital. I gave birth to twin babies. It was a caesarian section. Unfortunately one twin died shortly after birth. After a couple of days I was discharged from the hospital. I started looking for piece jobs to sustain me, my baby and my mother. I got washing temp jobs and I did anything for money. Things got even worse when my mother started getting sick. She got so sick that I spent days taking her to the doctors. She eventually was admitted. Finding food for her and visiting her daily was difficult. I did not have food in the house and I did not have the taxi fare to get to Mahatma Gandhi. Most of the times, I had to walk to the hospital. One day when I got to the hospital I found my mother lying on the benches. She told me that she was discharged. I was hurt and I could see that she was really sick but I took her home. As soon as we got to the house she died. I was all alone in the house. I screamed for help and the neighbors came to help. Whilst I was still confused and overwhelmed by mother's death, I was hit by the news that my father had died too. Things were tough, losing both parents in the same week. I had to mourn my mother, I was sure that I was not going to attend my father's funeral. My mother was in the mortuary for three weeks as there was no money to bury her. I got help from church. They helped me bury my mother.

“FINDING FOOD FOR HER AND VISITING HER DAILY WAS DIFFICULT”

I then continued doing piece jobs to sustain myself and my child. I still stay in the rented shack. It still hurts to think my life has come to a standstill. I grew up in the shack and my children are also growing up in a shack. I just wish that when my dying day finally arrives, my children will have a proper home, owned by them.

After sometime, I met someone who promised to love and care for me. At the beginning, all was well. Life was good. I even liked the fact that he was from the rural area and he had the spirit of humanity, all humble and respectful. As time passed, things changed, he started cheating and lying. I started having female enemies because of him. To date he is still cheating and is player. But what pierced my heart was the fact that when he got sick from all his dirty tricks, he blamed me for bringing home sexually transmitted diseases. He even tried to commit suicide and people assumed that I had bewitched him. I was treated very badly by the community and his family. But everything passes, this too passed. He eventually got sick from gonorrhoea. He was so sick that he had to undergo an operation. I still stood by him. I companied him to hospitals. I took very good care of him. He recovered and he went back to his old self. He is dating other women and is still playing around with his life.

I just pray for the financial strength so that I can build a home for my children. I have three children. The older girl stays with her grandmother. I stay with my two sons. The father of the second son gives no financial support and I stay with the father of the younger son who does all he can to support us.

MY COUSIN TRIED TO **RAPE ME**

I was born in September, 1977 in KwaZulu Natal. My family is originally from Matatiele. At home there are five of us now. My mother sent me back to my uncle and aunt in Matatiele as she was working and could not look after me.

Growing up without a mother was very tough. Most of my cousins were girls, as a result, my aunt could not get sanitary pads, and we had to use old cloths. My mother did not send money to my uncle. My other cousin tried to rape me one day. I loved watching television until late. It was only the two of us and he called. He instructed me to sit on his lap. I think he was twenty years old and I was about twelve years old. I indeed sat on his lap. I freaked out when I felt that he was trying to shove something up my vagina. We had a blanket over us. I immediately jumped up and I ran to the bedroom. I never told anyone about this incident. I only told my mother after my cousin was dead. When I was in grade ten, I fell pregnant, that was in 2005. I stayed for the whole year raising the baby. It was not bad because I got maintenance support from his father who paid maintenance until he was four years old.

My mother advised me to come to Durban to complete my studies. After matric I did not have money to further my studies. I stayed at home doing nothing. I did not even manage to get piece jobs. I stayed at home for four years. I eventually met a friend who advised me about bursaries in Elangeni College. I went and applied and I am currently studying towards a diploma for Safety in Society. I am doing my final year. I have learnt a lot.

Sometime towards the end of the year, 2013, I had skin rash. My body was itchy. I went to the clinic and I was diagnosed with HIV. I took blood tests and discovered that my CD4 cell count was below 200. I was advised to take some immune boosters for a week and come back after a week for ARV treatment. I indeed came back for medication but I could not get the medication as the X-ray machine was faulty. They had to do TB screening before they could give me ARVs. I was angry and disappointed. I was anxious and thought that it could be too late as I was weak. I wanted to get into treatment as here and then. But unfortunately they had to follow the procedure. I came back again the next morning. I did see the doctor who ran all the necessary tests and I got my ARVs. They have helped improve the state of my health. I see a big difference now. I have also encouraged my friends to go for HIV tests so that they do not wait until it is too late like me. Disclosing my HIV status at home was not a nightmare as my mother was living with HIV as well. She had been on ARVs for a while. It was easy for me to disclose as my family already knew about HIV and AIDS. I then disclosed to my boyfriend. We have been together for seven years but we do not have any children. I think he was the cause of my sickness. He had been taking ARVs and he was not true to me about it. When I confronted him about the pills, he said they are ARVs but he does not take them. I see that he was maybe not ready to disclose or he was telling a lie, he took them discreetly. I think I developed resistance because through having unprotected sex with him, I was indirectly introduced to ARVs and as a result developed resistance when my opportunity to take ARVs arrived.

But when I confronted him after being sick, he apologized and said he does not want us to break up. So we are still together. I knew that I was HIV positive before we met but my CD4 cell count was high as I took care of my health. I do not hate him for lying. He now knows that I am taking ARVs and I am not sure whether he is taking his or not. But always advise him to take good care of his health as he has children looking up to him.

IT WAS VERY COLD TO WALK TO **SCHOOL BAREFOOTED**

I was born in Obonjeni. I grew up living with an extended family including my mother and father. In 2002 my mother died. She died from an AIDS related disease. She also had TB. My mother disclosed her status to the family and told us not to even think that she was bewitched. She was diagnosed with AIDS and it was too late for her to start her ARV treatment. My mother's death was very emotional and painful and she left behind two very young children. The youngest child was only two years old.

I had to leave school to look after these children and I was only in grade 3. I was the eldest girl at home. The family was linked up with social workers who helped us with food parcels, school fees and also helped with foster care application. I was then able to go back to school. The school was very far from home. So in winter, I used to drop out of school as it was very cold. And I also did not perform very well in school. I repeated a few grades and I was often absent from school. We also did not have shoes and so it was very cold to walk to school every morning. The passing of parents also affected me so badly and the teachers helped counsel and encouraged me to engage in school. I used to sit on my own and be overwhelmed by all the hardship at home. But the teachers also encouraged me to participate in sports and I believe they were trying to keep me occupied and enjoy my childhood. They also liked having conversations with me. With time, I eventually eased up and I felt light. I dropped out of school when I was doing grade 7 because I got pregnant. I do not even know how it happened. My boyfriend requested that I give him permission to "taste" something and I agreed. I had no idea what it was. All I remember is that it was painful. So after my first sexual encounter I fled and went to stay with my aunt. Little did I know that I was pregnant. I went back home to wait to go into labour and raise my baby. I gave birth to a baby boy and he is six years old now. The tricky thing is that when I got pregnant, I had not even started getting my periods.

I am currently in Durban. I am not yet working. I am still looking for piece jobs. I am staying with a friend from back at home. I used my child social grant to sustain myself. My siblings back at home are well taken care of as the social workers are still looking after their basic needs. My grandmother is still well and she looks after them and they are still schooling. My father's sister is also very supportive. She is the guardian. She buys groceries, pays for their school fees and save some money for tertiary education. Life is not bad at all.

WHEN I SEE A MAN CARRYING A GIRL... I ALWAYS **THINK HE IS ABUSING HER**

I was born in Appelsbosch in 1981. I have five siblings. We grew up in different households. I grew up staying with my father at his place of employment. My father requested from my mother that he would like me to stay with him. When I was about twelve years old, he started sexually abusing me. He continued doing this for a while. I eventually decided to tell my mother. It did not help. She told me to keep it to myself as my father was the bread winner and there was no way we could expose him.

She told me that I needed to be brave and just endure the pain because she did not want to make my father angry. I could not continue staying with my father. I requested permission to go stay at home with my mother and my family. This also did not make any difference as it continued whenever my father was back from work. He would tell me that he was going to blow my head off with a gun if I told anybody about his actions. I was terrified because he did have a rifle.

It was too painful and difficult to handle. I decided to leave my home. I just decided to take a train. I stole money at home and got into a train and I had no idea when I was going. When I got off at some train station a good woman listened to my story and took me to her house. I stayed with her for three years. She eventually got very sick, that is when her family arrived and took her back home. And so in that way, I was stranded. I did not have a home.

I then took my belongings and went back home. I stayed around the area. I tried to get information about my siblings. I went and asked my aunt who told me that they had relocated. I went looking for them and I indeed found them. I am currently staying with them.

The problem is that I still have not gotten over what I went through. I try to forget but it's hard. I am now drinking hard. I do not want to drink. But it's the only way that helps me forget this incident for a while. My father passed away some time ago. I hated him so much. I did not even attend his funeral service. My mother wanted me to attend the funeral but I could not. My mother also pleads that I return home but I cannot. It's not easy to go back home because I do not like my mother either. I tried to forget about my mother because she was not there when I need her the most. I was young and I needed her to protect me and she did not. I trusted her and her alone in this world. I did tell my sisters about my experience. They do not understand. They tell me to forget and move on. They want me to go back home and forgive my mother. When I visit home, I still get flash backs. It feels like it was yesterday. When I see the houses and the places where my father used to rape me, my heart bleeds. In the midst of it all I did manage to go to school

using the money from piece jobs. I dropped out of school when I was doing grade ten. I did not have the funds to pay for my school fees. When I was about eighteen years old, I got involved with someone and I got pregnant. My child would be ten if she did not die. When she was three years, she got sick and died. I thought it was just flu but it turned out that it was something more than that and she lost the battle. But to date I still do not know what was wrong with her.

“I DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL WHEN I WAS DOING GRADE TEN”

I am currently staying with a neighbour from back home. The problem is that I still have not managed to find some temp job and that bothers me. I still do not go home. Even during Christmas holidays, I stay in a shack because there is nothing that I enjoy when I go home.

To date, I hate men. I am dating women. I do interact with men but at times I just feel irritated and angry at any male person. I do not trust any men. I always think they are all evil. I always think that all men abuse their children and mothers let them get away with it. When I see a man carrying a girl child or playing with his child I always think that he is somehow abusing her and even if it is out of love, I just do not like seeing a man carrying a girl child. I wish I could get professional help and some counselling as this is impacting on the way I think, the way I live and the way I see the world. I sometimes think it would have been better if we had spoken and made peace with my father before he died.

I DISCOVERED THAT MY IMMUNE SYSTEM WAS COMPROMISED

I was born in 1986 in the Eastern Cape. Life was tough at home and I came to Durban to seek greener pastures. I arrived in Durban in 2011. When I arrived I stayed with my boyfriend from back home. We had a child. But after a while, we broke up. We now do not live together. I am unemployed. I sell alcohol to make a living for me and my children. I now have four children that I have sent back home and my mother looks after them. I do get the child social grant for two children.

In 2004, I discovered that I was HIV positive. I have not told anyone about it. I have kept this to myself. I know a lot about HIV/AIDS, after attending group discussions with the Mkabayi group. I was motivated to go check my CD 4 cell count and look after my health. I discovered that my immune system was compromised and I had to start taking ARVs. The clinic staff encouraged me to start taking ARV treatment. I started the classes but I was impatient. They told me that before taking ARVs I need to finish a course of some pills. I was impatient; I wanted to start taking ARVs immediately. I had a sick child with me. They gave a course of

pills to complete before starting ARVs. I now suffer from headaches. I am weak and I do feel sick. I have also lost weight. I want to go back but I am scared. And I really do not know what prevents me from going to the clinic and get help. I have told my partner that I have HIV and I am not well. He has also gone to the clinic and he tested HIV negative. But I can see that he is also not well but he insists that his HIV test results are always negative. I know the importance of going to the clinic and I will visit the clinic soon.

I grew up in an abusive home. My mother and father were married. When I was young I discovered that my father was a thug. He was eventually arrested and I stayed with my grandmother. We stayed with our grandmother for a long time until we grew up. My uncle was not treating us well. He used to provoke my mother and they fought a lot. And life became very difficult and complicated. After a while, we lost our father. He drowned at the river. When my father died my mother was very sick but she recovered after my father's death. She is now the bread winner and takes care of all of us at home.

AIDS RUINED MY LIFE BY TAKING BOTH **MY PARENTS**

I was born in KwaZulu Natal, Life was difficult. We struggled as a family. I arrived in Durban in 2008 and completed my matric. I did not complete matric because of financial constraints and I also encountered personal problems. But I did not give up, I supplemented the subjects I failed and I got my matric certificate. My two brothers did not complete school.

I do not have a child. I am currently staying with a friend. My mother and father were married. My father used to travel a lot and I think that is when he contracted HIV. When he started getting sick we all thought that he was bewitched. After a while, it was discovered that he was HIV positive. He eventually got AIDS and he was sick for a very long time and eventually died. Shortly after my father's death, my mother also got sick and she died.

As children, we were taken by different relatives. I stayed with my grandmother who also did not live very long. She also died. My young sister was sexually abused where she was staying. Life became very difficult. AIDS really ruined my life by taking both my parents.

When I grew up, I loved fashion design and it was my dream to become a professional dressmaker. I would draw patterns and clothes, but due to financial constraints, my dream failed. I am currently studying to become a teacher. I do not like what I am studying but I did not have a choice. I am still angry at my family for not giving me enough support as a child. I last went home two years ago. I do not like going home. I do not look forward to go home as my step brother decided to commit suicide at home, in our house. He grew up in Johannesburg. He did not even stay long before he decided to kill himself. I still have not gotten over that incident because I am failing to understand why he had to come back to our home to commit suicide. He did not even leave a suicide note for us to understand what was bothering him.

I WAS YOUNG, BUT STILL AWARE OF WHAT **WAS HAPPENING**

I was born in KwaZulu Natal. When my mother conceived me, my father abandoned me. He said he would only know that I am his child at birth. But my mother kept the baby. My mother raised me up as a single parent. It was difficult. I grew up in an extended family, with my uncles and grandmother. My mother was a bread winner.

Although, I was still young, I was quite aware of what was happening around me. In 2005, my mother got very sick. She was weak and could not do things for herself. I had to drop out of school and look after her. But that was not too difficult as the family also helped me with that. Although there was nothing much that they could do as they were all men, but their presence made things better. My mother was sick for a very long time. She did not get any better until she was called to rest. That was painful but I felt better because she was in so much pain. Somehow I was glad that she was free from pain. Seeing her suffer like that was unbearable. I was only thirteen years old. She disclosed her HIV status to me. Although I was young, I have heard a lot about HIV and AIDS. My father was already dead. I know my father's family but I do not have any relationship with them but I do see them from time to time and they give me what they can.

After my mother's death, things got worse. The love and care that I knew from my family vanished. My family members changed. Nobody showed love and care. I needed love more than anything. I eventually got it from outside. Nobody knows how I am now, how is my life, what do I eat and how do I clothe myself. I now stay with a man. I still talk to my family but I feel empty and I think they are just faking it. I have never planned to stay with a man but it happened. He is not even financially stable. He gets temp jobs and at times he does not get them.

As I grow up I learnt how important it is to be independent. You must not depend on people, even your family because they are not always loyal to you. You must be humble, respectful because no one knows what the future holds for you. I am young but I have been through a lot and I am now strong to face any situation. I still want to go back to school. I am now raising my boyfriend's child. His girlfriend dumped him and I had to mother him. He was still a baby when she left him. I am raising him as my own child. Even though there are challenges where I am currently staying, but it feels like home. They treat me like their own child. Staying with parents that treat me like their own child makes me happy.

I DID NOT WANT TO FEEL THE PAIN THAT IS WHY I TRIED KILLING MYSELF

BEFORE HE DID

I was born in KwaZulu Natal. Life as a child was not easy. I was born in a very struggling family. My family situation pushed me into a relationship that further put my life at risk. I got involved with a person and I got pregnant. He was abusive. He was very jealous and he would beat me up. I eventually took a decision to relocate to Durban because of the hardship that I faced with home.

Life is not easy now but it is better than before. But the incident of being abused with the father of my children was the worst. I will never forget that experience. Things got worse when he beat me up in town. To date, I cannot recall what is it that made him beat me so hard. People who were close to us they called the police to the scene. Upon arrival, one police man called me to the side. He was my father's age. He spoke to me as a father. He asked me whether I was married to the guy or not. I told him, no we were not married. He asked me about my parents. I also told him that they were at home. He advised me about the dangers of staying in abusive relationships. My eyes were swollen but I could still slightly see. I requested that they do not arrest him.

My clothes were covered in blood because I was bleeding from my nose. I rushed to the toilets and I managed to give the little school girl my home telephone number. I asked her to call my house and tell them that my boyfriend was trying to kill me. I told her to tell them that he is also stopping me from going home. He wants to take me with him to his place. I stayed in the toilet for about an hour. I eventually got out of the toilet and I went to the shops and bought new clothes and I got rid of the dirty ones. My boyfriend was waiting for me and he took me to his place. When we got to his place, my brother was already waiting for us. And I tried to explain what had happened but my boyfriend would not let me. I then told my brother to leave and go tell my parents what he had observed. I prepared a hot bath for myself, I was in so much pain and was trying to sleep but he started all over again. He told me that do I know that he can do anything with me. If he wants to kill me, he can and buries me in his house and nobody will discover my body. I decided not to respond. I did not want to make him angry. He started beating me up. He beat me up for the whole night. He was beating my thighs, back and my bums. When he eventually finished beating me he demanded sex. He forced himself on me. In the morning he insisted that he was going to take me to the doctors. I requested that he allow me to go home and change. Indeed he agreed. When I got home, my family had already gone to tell a king about how this guy abused me. There were people who wanted to become witnesses because they had seen and witnessed his aggressiveness. From that day I was hiding from him. I relocated. I just heard that he would stop anyone and demand that they tell him where I was. When he realized that he was not getting any information, he went and wanted to start abusing our children. He wanted to kill my children. He would wait for them outside the school gate. Life was difficult. He then said if they do not tell him where I was, he was going to kill them. Things got really bad. Even in the area things were tough. The King announced that anyone who would get hold of him had a right to shoot or hurt him. But they should not kill him. They should hurt him in a way that would prevent him from injuring other people. He continued to harass me via the phone. He would say nobody will stop him from getting me and nobody will hurt him. I did believe him as he used muthi. My boyfriend also had his spies who told him about my whereabouts. When I visited home, he somehow knew and he would pitch up. He would come and hang around my house and start threatening us. One day we lost a relative and I had to go

home. He knew about it. I think he thought that I was on my own as he had heard that I was back home. His house was across ours. So he was able to see all the movements around my house. When he realized that everybody was gone to the house where the funeral was going to be held, he came straight to my house. Fortunately my mother was still at home. When he got to the homestead, all the children cried out loud. It was very bad because even his children were scared of him. He had become a beast. The children ran into the house and locked the doors. My mother had to shout for help. My boyfriend told her to shut up as no one was going to help her. Fortunately there was a community gathering not far from home, everybody heard my mother shouting and they came to our rescue. The police also arrived at the scene. When my boyfriend realized that the community was out to get him, he grabbed his boy child and ran away with him. I was terrified and I screamed and he released him. I then ran away to hide. He went and stood on top of the hill and shot in the air, the community was terrified. Even the elders were standing around watching him. Even the king and his servants stood in dismay watching him insult the nation. He told them that he was untouchable. When the police got to the scene, he had already left the area. During the following day, he came back to the area. We realized that he had cut out all the water pipes for our house and for neighbouring houses. He went around shouting that he wants to see me go fetch water in the river so that he can get hold of me. The community ran out of water. It was really tough as he used to hide in the bushes next to the river and wait for me. People were also scared of going to the river as well. My brothers helped out as they would go to fetch water for the family.

“WHEN MY BOYFRIEND REALIZED THAT THE COMMUNITY WAS OUT TO GET HIM, HE GRABBED HIS BOY CHILD AND RAN AWAY”

I then relocated and went and stayed with my sister. I stayed with her for a while and one day I just decided to talk to one of the girls about the kind of life that I led. Whilst we were talking to her, some women came and interrupted us. And I went back to the house and I left them talking about their issues. After about five minutes, my boyfriend emerged from the gate. He had searched and somehow managed to trace my whereabouts. Since this other girl had just heard a story about my life, they said they did not know me. They told him I never came to the complex. He left and we thought that he had left, but he had not. We discovered that he was hiding outside in the garden. The girls told me not to leave the house. They would keep checking on me and providing me with food. I had to pee in the house. He came and knocked on the house where I was hiding but I did not open the door. The lights in the house were on. He demanded to know who was in the house. The girls next door told him that the house belonged to my sister but she had gone to see her boyfriend. He was told that my sister has a roommate. She probably had switched on the lights. My sister's roommate might have left the lights on by mistake. I was terrified. I realized that the man was prepared to kill me.

That night I wrote a letter to my family. It was a suicide note. I then took all types of tablets that were in my sister's house and I swallowed them. I fell into a deep sleep and I woke up the next day. I felt nothing. It was like I had not taken anything. I thought maybe he was going to do something horrible so I did not want to feel the pain that is why I tried to kill myself before he did. But before I slept, I had given king's number

to one flat mate so that he would have told the king what had happened just in case I died. My sister eventually arrived with her boyfriend. My sister's boyfriend saw him before he did. He acted like a crazy man. We called my mother to come and get me in town. My sister's boyfriend drove me to town and my mother was already waiting for me. We went home. And he heard that I was back at home. He hunted me like a buck. I relocated to another village. He lost me. He failed to track me. He would go to school and try to kidnap my children. But that was not easy as the school was closer to home and the children were under close security. The school was also cautioned about him, so the school gate was always locked.

“HE WOULD GO TO SCHOOL AND TRY TO KIDNAP MY CHILDREN”

One day I was in town and I bumped into him. Everybody was scared. But surprisingly he was very nice and gentle. He told me that he will never kill me. He told me that he was saving money to pay lobolo for me. He wants to marry me. I told him I was scared of him and I did not think that he was going to be able to marry me. He once tried to kill me. And everybody knew how badly he had abused me. Everybody was terrified. The woman traders as well were moving up and down. Even the person who had never met me knew a lot about me and my abusive life. Surprisingly he let me go. He even gave me money to give the money to his children. I took the money and thanked him. Everybody was terrified. They asked me if I was not scared of him just in case he followed and killed me. Although I was also terrified but I told them that if it is God's will, so be it. I even told him that I was God's child. He may want to kill me but it may be the other way around.

When I arrived at home, my family was relieved to see that I was well. They were expecting to hear anything. They thought that he would kill me. That was the last time I saw him. I would hear stories about him and how he harassed my family demanding to see his children. He continued his threats about killing his children before he took his own life. He said he would not leave his children with a poor family.

Not so long after that he died. On his dying day I heard that he was boasting around and claiming that he was untouchable. He went home and demanded to get his children. But at home they did not allow him. I heard that he was throwing his gun around and telling people that he had just been to his inyanga and nobody could shoot him. He told them he would go to my house and kill everybody. His mother warned him about abusing the other families and told him that he was bringing curses upon him. However he continued to boast. It was not long before we heard gunshots. It was the early hours of the evening. The neighbours were too scared to go outside and check what had happened. Everybody locked themselves in their homes until the morning. It was during the early hours of the morning, at sunrise when we heard that he was dead. He had a bullet wound and no one knew who killed him. What hurt me was hearing his mother's words saying "my child died because of the hooligan". His body stayed on the hill for the whole day and night. Police did not want to go and collect his body. The community members came around and just stared at him. The community was relieved that "Goliath" was finally dead. His mother was crying so loud. The community asked him that your son has wanted to kill another woman's child, would you have liked it if he managed to kill her. His body was then collected the next day on the hill.

His family called me to inform me that he was dead. They asked me whether I had heard about his death or not. They also asked me to tell the children about their father's death. But what puzzled me is that his children were also relieved that he was dead. His son said that it was better that he died because he had tried to take their lives.

His mother had never said anything when her son was giving me trouble but on his death she started making false accusations. She said her son had written many letters to me. I had never received the letters. His mother collected all the letters and gave them to the detectives. I received a call from the detectives who wanted me to go to the police station for questioning regarding my boyfriend's death. The King told me to be brave. He said if I faced any problems, I must let him know, he would intervene. The police never did anything to protect me when this man was giving me a hard time. I was up and down with the detectives. My father would accompany me. I told them everything as I had nothing to hide. They wanted to know if I seeing another man other than the dead one. I told them that I had dated only one man, the dead man. It was clear that his family suspected me of his death and suspected that I sent "my new boyfriend" to kill him. I asked them to call his mother so that she could tell us who that man was. And they could not do that as it was all a lie. My boyfriend stayed in the mortuary for two weeks. The King refused to have him buried in his village because he disrespected him and the community. Even the neighbouring village did not accept the request of having him buried at their village. The other King from the third village also refused and said he does not bury people he has never met in his village. He was eventually buried at the government mortuary. My children do not know where he was buried and they did not even go to his funeral.

This relationship was very abusive and it had a huge impact on my life. My love life is now a disaster. I am just not able to be happy in a relationship. I have become a violent person who now becomes easily irritated and who always tries to protect herself . I am always ready for a fight. In a relationship after this one I could not even play with my boyfriend, when he tried to be playful and romantic, I responded with bad punches and I would just defend myself. He did not understand what was going on and I requested that we end the relationship. I realized that I was still very angry and I was going to injure and hurt an innocent soul. I had to let him go.

“I HAVE BECOME A VIOLENT PERSON WHO NOW BECOMES EASILY IRRITATED AND WHO ALWAYS TRIES TO PROTECT HERSELF”

I am an independent woman. I am raising my children on my own. We do not have a house but we are renting a house. We move from house to house. I do piece jobs. I currently work at the salon. Life is difficult. I was in a car accident early this year. I am trying to live though it's difficult but it's manageable.





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