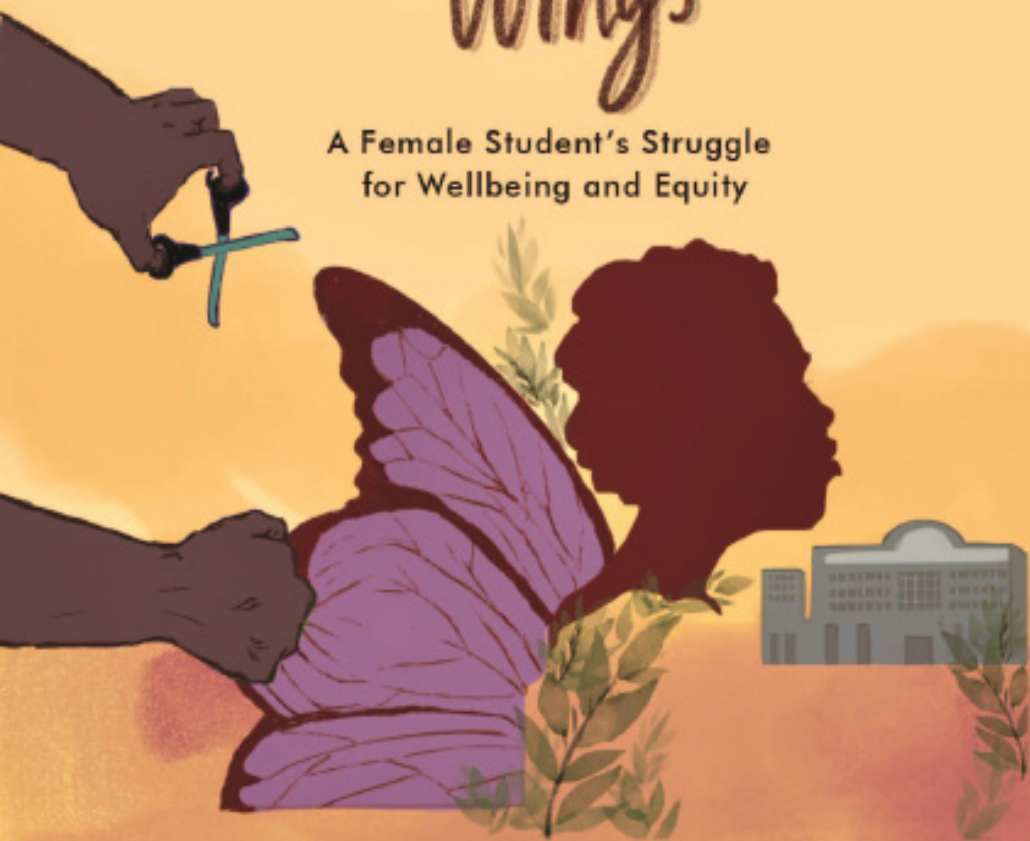


# Unclipped Wings

A Female Student's Struggle  
for Wellbeing and Equity



Researched and Written by  
**Zibah Nwako, Ph.D**

Adapted by  
**Nathalie Ukwu**

Illustrated by  
**Ijeoma Ossi**

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With thanks to Professor Arathi Sriprakash and Priscilla Taiwo.

***Dedicated to all Female Students in  
Nigerian Tertiary Education Institutions***

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# PREFACE

The graphic novella is set in the University of the South-East of Nigeria (UniSEN), a pseudonym for a Federal University in Nigeria, West Africa. While the focus of the university administration seems to be on staff salaries and working conditions, hierarchies, and physical infrastructure, not enough attention is given to other areas of campus life that affect the wellbeing and welfare of female students.

Issues of gender-based expectations and biases, bullying and harassment, health-related concerns, a culture of fear, and a lack of activities that empower personal agency largely remain unaddressed. These challenges have a negative impact on the average female student at the university.

*Unclipped Wings* is based on a participatory research study that explored the wellbeing and welfare of female undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary education institutions. The novella tells the story of four young women, whose individual and collective experiences at UniSEN reflect some of the struggles faced by a considerable number of female students. The protagonist, Chinwe Okoli, is motivated by her own ideals to fight for student wellbeing and justice in the face of patriarchal assumptions about gender roles at home and in society.

Through *Unclipped Wings*, I aim to portray my research findings in an authentic and accessible format, that both academic and non-academic audiences can understand and relate to.



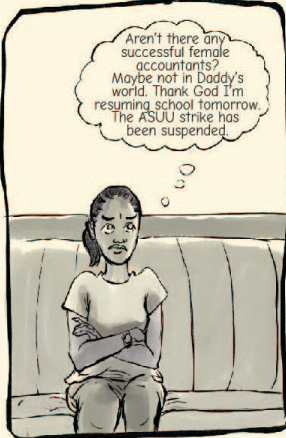
As a woman who was born, raised, and educated in Nigeria before moving abroad to live, study, and work, I have a professional and personal interest in international women's development. I continue to seek insights into the self-perceptions and self-identities of girls and women in Africa, to better understand their aspirations, what they consider to be achievements, their views about their agency and potential, and how they deal with daily challenges.

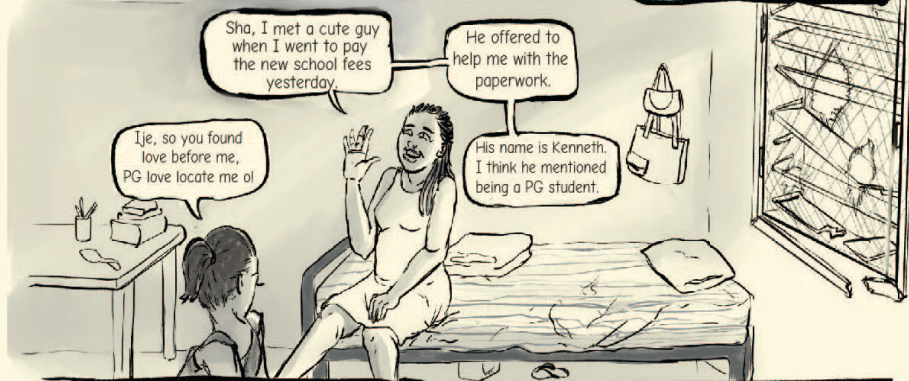
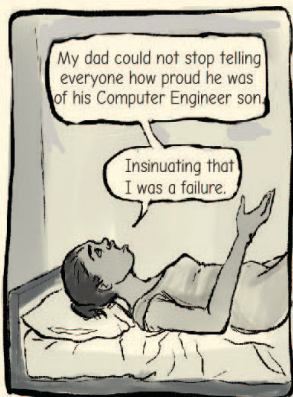
Do enjoy reading the novella! I hope you find the story insightful, and the discussion points thought-provoking.

Zibah



AKANU IBIAM INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

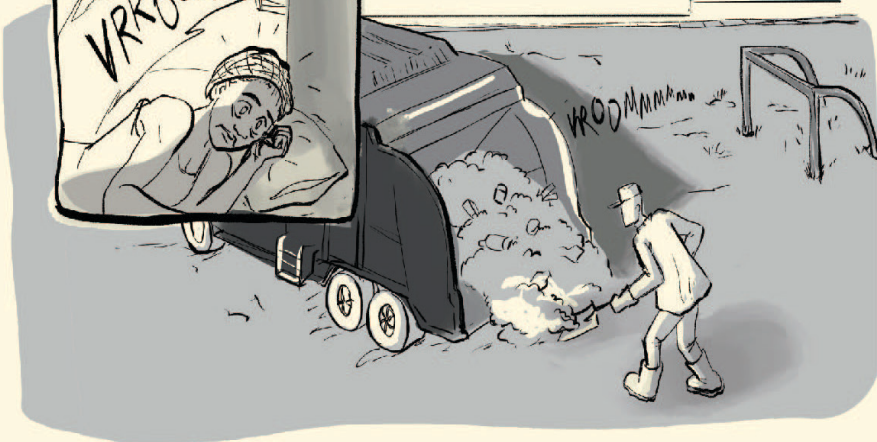




These guys again! If only they did as much work as the noise they make. Now this room will be filled with smoke from burnt garbage!



The State Waste Management Authority (SWAMA) truck, collecting a heap of garbage across the field where the boys play football in the evenings.

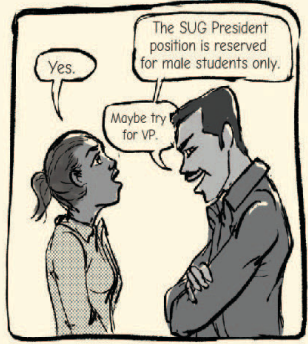






Wrapping her shoes in her handbag, Chinwe wears her bathroom slippers in order to struggle through the muddy water and potholes.

Inside the campus gate, Chinwe boards a Keke Napep which drops her off at her classroom block close to the UNISEN main library.

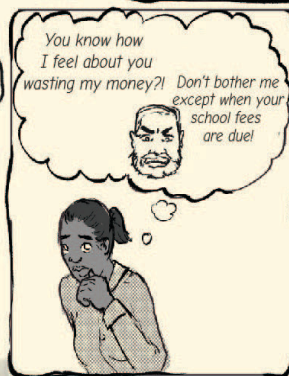
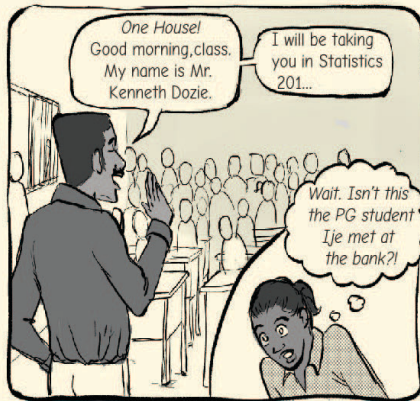
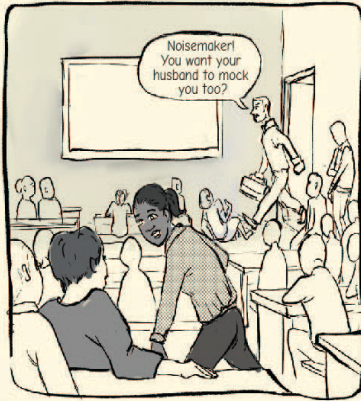


The Lecture Hall

6







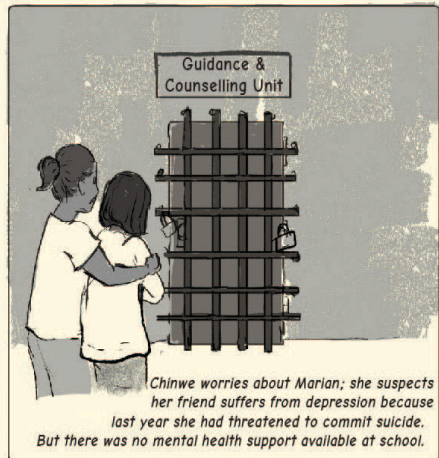
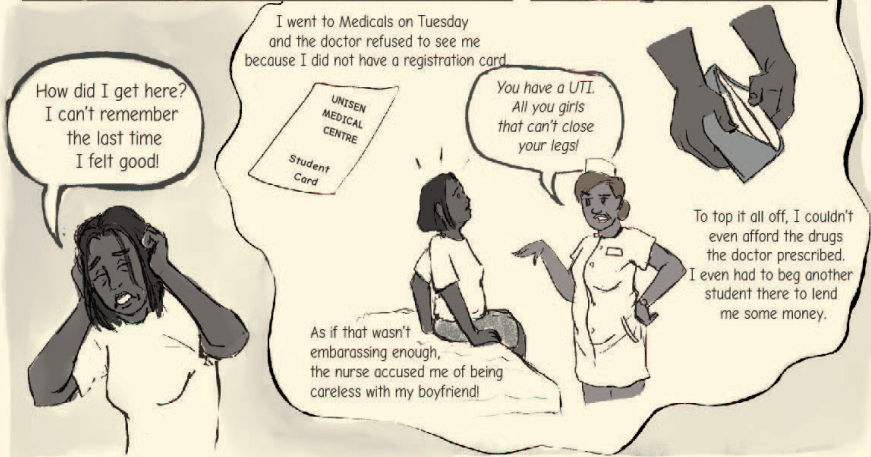
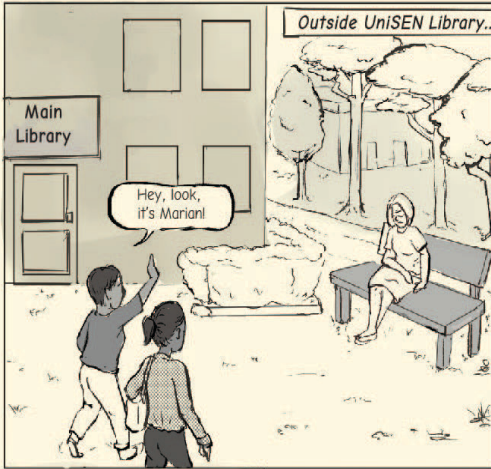
Seeing that Edwin is too occupied, later that day, Chinwe finds Mr. Kenneth's office herself.



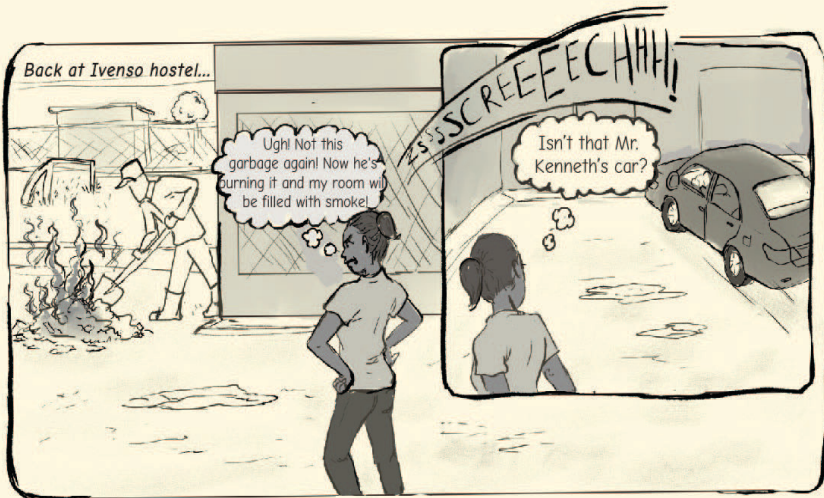
As she quickly leaves, Chinwe sees Ije coming to the office. Her suspicions are confirmed.











Back at Ivenso hostel...

Ugh! Not this garbage again! Now he's burning it and my room will be filled with smoke!

SCREEEECH!!!

Isn't that Mr. Kenneth's car?



Slay mam! So what's the situation with you two?

Well, Ken and I are in love. He's a nice guy Chinwe, don't worry about me.

He even paid for my classes at the Euro Centre and said he could take me to France!



Ije, don't you think it's a little fast?

What if he is trying to take advantage-

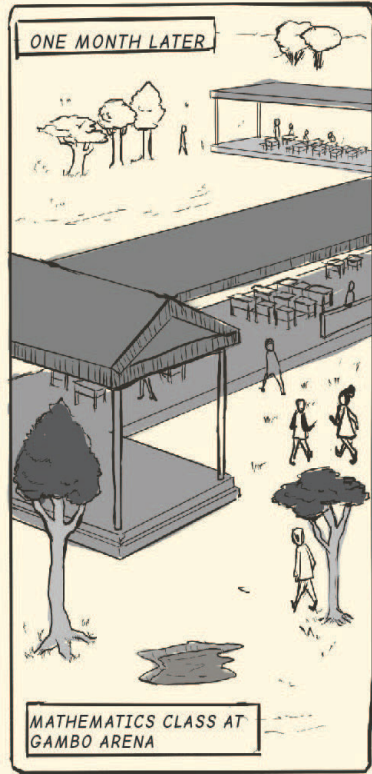


You know what Chinwe, how about you mind your business and stick to what you know: fighting men for EQUALITY!

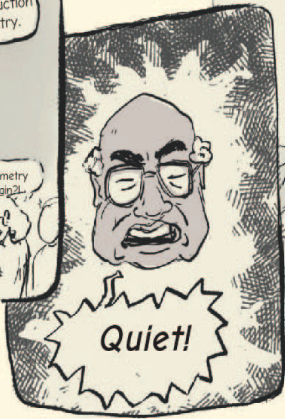
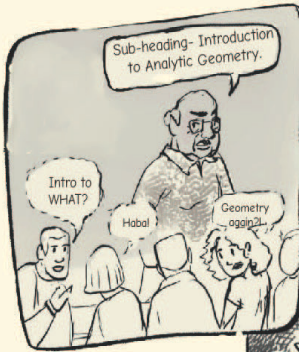


Chinwe is saddened by Ije's reaction and leaves to give her some space to cool off.

She decides to go back out for a stroll and calls Nnamdi to vent.







LATER THAT EVENING...





AFTER THE EXAMS...

NAME'S	GRADE	NAME	GRADE
...	C	...	F
...	D	...	C
...	A	...	B
...	B	...	D
...	F	...	F
...	D	...	B
...	C	...	D



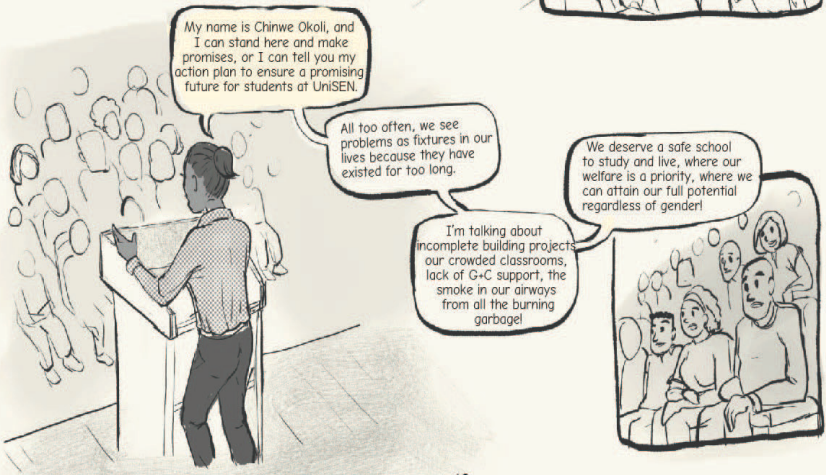
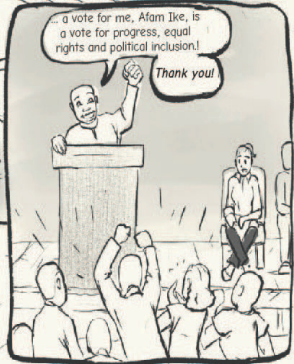


THIRD YEAR

Chinwe has qualified for the final round of the SUG election contesting for the position of President.



As she mounts the podium, there are whispers and giggles in the audience. Chinwe, although she is nervous, goes on to present her manifesto





Maybe Ije, Mr. Kenneth and Daddy were right after all ...women can never be equal to men in any area.

What is the point when it is impossible?





A FEW DAYS LATER...



When I found out, I was actually happy

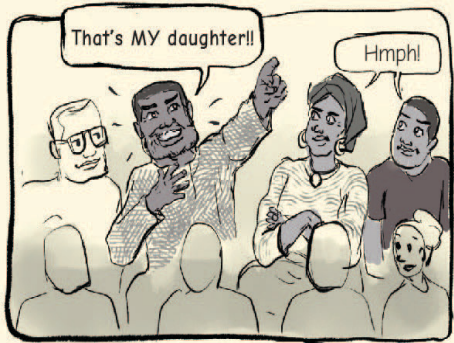
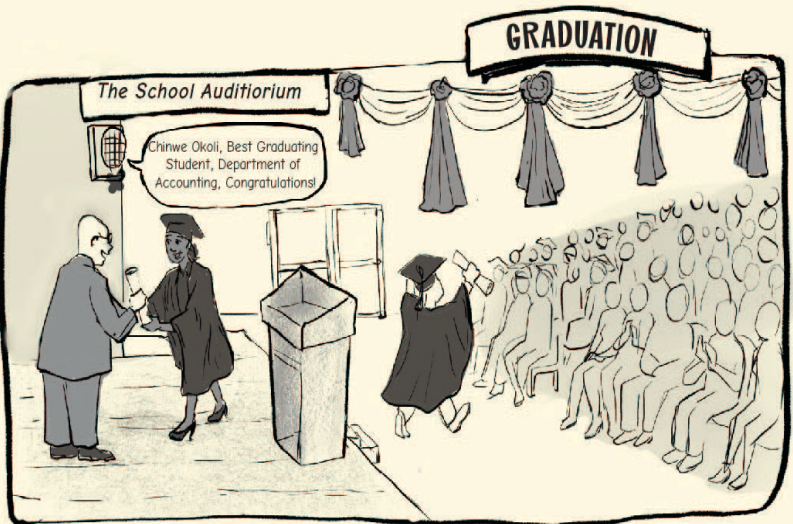
Until I told Kenneth. He became a monster!



During the next two weeks...



As before, there is no advice for pregnant students from G+C, no support from Medicals, and no one else to turn to. Instead, Ije faces the stigma of gossip and abuse from other students and the shame of telling her parents.







We got justice for Ije Daniels by collaborating with the school authorities, leading to Mr. Kenneth Dozie's expulsion as a postgraduate student, dismissal as a lecturer and prosecution.



Through our efforts this year, there has been an increase in the number of female candidates for previously male-dominated leadership roles.



We organized an Enlightenment series for female students to improve their health and welfare, including emotional wellbeing talks and skills trainings.



## DISCUSSION GUIDE

Read and discuss the graphic novella using the following questions as a guide.

1. What do the words “unclipped wings” stir in your heart as a young woman? Explain.
2. How do you think Chinwe felt after losing the election just because of her gender?
3. Have you or someone you know experienced bias or unfair treatment because of your/their gender? Share this experience.
4. How does gender bias affect female students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?
5. Have you ever felt like you were a failure because you didn't meet the expectations of your family, school, or society?
6. Do you experience situations where you are overwhelmed and need someone to share with? How do you handle such situations?
7. What lessons did you learn from this graphic novella?
8. Which character do you relate to the most and why?
9. Pick one of the challenges experienced by the characters and discuss what you would have done differently.
10. What does wellbeing mean to you as an individual?
11. How does your mindset affect your wellbeing?
12. If you are a student, how much control do you think you have over your own life and decisions? Explain with examples.
13. From the experiences of the characters in the novella, what do you think affects the wellbeing of female students?

14. What measures can be taken to give the female students a voice?  
Who is responsible for this and why?
15. Are female students able to empower themselves? If yes, how so  
you suggest that they do so? If no, explain why.
16. Do you know any non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or  
bodies that advocate for women's rights, empowerment, and  
equity? If yes, list them. If no, how can you find out about them?
17. After reading this novella, what advice would you offer to female  
students? What suggestions can you make to any of tertiary  
education institutions that you know?
18. In the novella, Chinwe formed a female students support group  
– how important do you think it is? What are the advantages and  
disadvantages of such groups?
19. Does a similar group exist in your school? If yes, how could you  
get involved in the cause? If no, what steps do you think you can  
take to establish one in your campus?
20. Can you think of any other needs to be met for female students  
to succeed and thrive, both within and outside the institution?

# STUDY REPORT

## Experiences of female students in the Nigerian context

In post-colonial Nigerian society, there are gender-based differences and inequities that are due to the patriarchal culture existing within homes, communities, religious settings, and institutions. It is a rigid culture that is driven by unequal opportunities for self-empowerment, employment and earnings, political inclusion, human development, educational enrolment, and achievement. This patriarchal system that has widened the gender gap and negatively affected the wellbeing of Nigerian women, is also reflected in the tertiary education environment.

However, challenges in Nigerian tertiary education institutions are not limited to a patriarchy-system of society where men hold the power and woman are excluded from it. Other limiting factors include unequal access to learning opportunities, unpredictable academic calendars, poor provision of mental & physical health facilities, and lack of gender participation in political spaces.

Regular strike action by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASU), as well as associated national disputes with the Federal Government, need to be resolved because they lead to an irregular academic calendar, which hinders students' abilities to learn and graduate on time. Access to desirable learning opportunities is sometimes limited by financial hardships, corruption, and unresolved disruptions.

These challenges, over time, affect the emotional and psychological wellbeing of students.

One key aspect of developing a conducive campus environment that encourages female students' wellbeing and welfare, is the availability of good quality facilities and resources that provide them with mental health services. The provision of gender-related guidance and counselling services can also improve their emotional health and personal agency<sup>1</sup>.

The reality, however, is often declining infrastructure, uncertainty about increase of tuition fees, and frequent staff union strikes. These are due to long-term challenges facing Nigerian tertiary education systems and the strain on few available resources. Such issues negatively impact on the experiences of female students and inevitably lead to fewer wellbeing outcomes.

## Wellbeing vs. Welfare

Descriptions of wellbeing vary across the world and are influenced by inequalities in healthcare systems, gaps between the rich and the poor, and levels of development especially between high and low-income countries. In most Western countries, wellbeing is often described as having a sense of purpose and satisfaction in life, healthy relationships, the fulfillment of potential, achieving goals, happiness, and independence. In some other countries, the term commonly used is welfare, which refers to a sense of wellness, the

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<sup>1</sup>Personal agency means having control of one's own behaviour, actions and responses even when facing external limitations.

state of doing well, the provision of activities, funding, or resources governments, businesses, or other institutions to maintain or enhance the wellbeing of citizens, workers, students, and others.

Professor Mahadi, from the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, described student welfare services in tertiary education institutions, as the provision of basic requirements to students for their survival, comfort, focus and better academic performance. These welfare services encompass good feeding, suitable accommodation, facilities for sports and recreation, guidance and counselling, satisfactory health and social amenities, as well as teaching and learning resources.

In 2017, Nigeria was ranked as having the lowest level of wellbeing and quality of life for young people among the 30 countries evaluated worldwide by the Global Youth Wellbeing Index, indicating that there is significant room for improvement. Regarding university students, the responsibility for campus safety, communications services, and gender issues lies with the Students' Welfare and Gender Issues Division of the National Universities Commission. However, there has until now been little focus on implementing these schemes to directly impact the wellbeing of female students.

When considering initiatives to improve students' experiences, the emphasis tends to focus on physical infrastructure and amenities that support general learning and survival, rather than addressing the values that are important to the students themselves. At UniSEN, student wellbeing is influenced by various factors including bureaucratic administrative processes, poor medical facilities, communication

barriers, inaccessible teaching and learning methods, insufficient stress management, inequitable student activism, and unprofessional staff attitudes. These challenges also form the basis for academic, environmental, socio-cultural, economic, and political issues that impact on student wellbeing.

The average female student's perception of welfare is shaped by her concept of a good quality of life, which is influenced by factors such as her physical health, cultural context, personal and collective<sup>2</sup> agency, social interactions, and mental or emotional wellbeing. However, the absence of specific policies or guidelines on student wellbeing has led to an increase in incidents of early drop-out, suicide cases, and unwanted pregnancy rates.

## Gender Justice and Wellbeing

A few international agreements have been made to address gender discrimination at the national level including the Rights of Women in Africa and the Nigeria National Gender Policy. These policies are also necessary at tertiary education levels, and their objectives must be implemented in practice, to achieve gender justice<sup>3</sup> and enhance the wellbeing of female students.

*Unclipped Wings* shows how gender justice is hindered by power dynamics within Nigerian tertiary education institutions, and in wider society, as evidenced by the way female students are spoken to, treated, disadvantaged, and marginalised. Their experiences at

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<sup>2</sup> Collective agency is when a group of people work together to shape their circumstances, decisions, and actions, in order to create change or achieve common goals.

<sup>3</sup> Gender justice means treating all genders fairly, giving equal rights and opportunities, removing bias and barriers, and creating a society where everyone can thrive.

UniSEN revealed significant inequalities in the policy and practice of teaching and learning, as well as in campus politics where it is believed that “no female student can run for president”. Some of these gendered inequalities and hierarchical obstacles have discouraged female students at UniSEN from aspiring to male-dominated political roles.

Tertiary education institutions often foster a culture of fear, powerlessness, and hopelessness, making it difficult for individuals to speak up or address these injustices. To challenge gender inequalities and improve their wellbeing, it is essential to treat female students with dignity, empower their abilities, and ensure their voice is heard through participation and representation.

## **Fostering Wellbeing in Educational Institutions**

*Unclipped Wings* somewhat points to an ideal academic environment that prioritises student wellbeing and welfare through effective guidance and counselling services, access to efficient healthcare, hygienic surroundings, and strict policies against the exploitation of students. There should also be a good network of roads, adequate transportation, safety and security, as well as leaders who model positive behaviour rather than support the misuse of authority. However, improving student wellbeing is everyone’s responsibility and necessitates collaborative efforts from institutions, governments, families, and the students themselves.

Here are some key areas to consider for achieving this:



### ***Policies and procedures***

Develop inclusive policies and enforce procedures that protect the rights and wellbeing of all students, regardless of gender. This includes addressing issues of discrimination and creating a more inclusive campus culture.

### ***Awareness and education***

Create awareness campaigns and educational programmes focused on mental health and wellbeing topics. These initiatives should incorporate discussions about the importance of seeking help, recognising signs of distress, and removing the stigma associated with mental health challenges.

Provide training for all staff members on how to respond compassionately and effectively to students seeking help, and signpost them to available help and resources.

### ***Supportive spaces and services***

Establish safe spaces on campuses where students can freely discuss their concerns without fear of judgment or punishment. These spaces could be in the form of counselling centres or support groups.

Strengthen campus guidance and counselling services to provide mental health support to students. These services should be confidential, well-staffed, and adequately resourced.

Encourage female students to speak up on matters concerning their mental health and general wellbeing.

### ***Reporting systems***

Establish clear and accessible reporting systems for incidents of

harassment and violence. These systems should be designed to protect the privacy and safety of victims and survivors, while enabling them to seek justice.

### ***Collective action and agency***

Encourage collective action and peer support among students. Students can also empower themselves by looking out for each other and reporting incidents of intimidation or harassment through the appropriate channels.

### ***Subjective wellbeing approach***

Integrate the knowledge of subjective wellbeing into institutional policies and practices. This means understanding that individuals' perceptions of their own happiness and life satisfaction play a significant role in their overall wellbeing.

### ***Stricter laws***

Advocate for the enforcement of stricter laws and more severe sanctions against acts of sexual harassment and violence. This approach will act as a deterrent and reinforce a zero-tolerance policy for such behaviour.

### ***Interorganisational collaborations***

Establish collaborations with government organisations such as the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, as well as NGOs dedicated to gender protection and addressing gender-based violence. These partnerships result in stronger support networks and access to valuable resources.

The implementation of these strategies can empower the female

student, develop her skills and abilities, and increase her personal agency. During this critical phase between adolescence and adulthood, her individual growth and social progress can contribute positively to societal advancement.

## **Ensuring Gender Equity in Society**

In addition to promoting female student wellbeing, striving for women emancipation and empowerment in post-colonial Nigeria, is essential to achieving a more equitable society. One approach towards this goal is to liberate mindsets and change perspectives, through various strategies:

### ***Curriculum adjustment***

Educational institutions should play a key role in empowering women. Curriculum adjustments that include courses promoting gender equity and addressing gender biases, will give students a more balanced and inclusive understanding of society. This may entail incorporating women's history, achievements, and contributions to various fields, as well as examining the impact of gender biases in society.

### ***Accessible information***

It is important to make resources on gender inequities and social hierarchies readily available. This could involve books, articles, workshops, and online platforms, ensuring that they are accessible to students and the wider community.

### ***Dismantling colonial structures***

Gender discrimination often persists as a legacy of colonialism.

When active efforts are made to dismantle societal, institutional, and individual colonial relationships, it becomes possible to challenge and break free from oppressive structures. This involves examining existing power dynamics and working towards a more inclusive and equal society.

### ***Enabling policies***

Gender justice can be achieved through policy changes that promote equity, empowerment, co-operation, security, and sustainability for women. These policies may address issues such as gender-based violence, access to education and healthcare, economic opportunities, and representation in leadership positions.

### ***Empowerment initiatives***

Initiatives that directly empower women should be implemented, including mentorship programmes, skill-building workshops, entrepreneurship support, and efforts to increase female participation in decision-making processes.

### ***Gender sensitisation and awareness***

Raising awareness about gender biases and their impact on women's lives is vital for fostering empathy and understanding. Gender sensitisation programmes can be conducted in schools, workplaces, and communities to promote empathy, respect, and gender equity.

### ***Engaging men and boys***

Achieving gender justice requires involving men and boys as allies in the process. Encouraging conversations about toxic masculinity, promoting healthy relationships, and challenging traditional gender

roles can lead to more supportive environments for women.

### ***Collaboration and advocacy***

For sustainable change, it is important to engage collaboratively with other stakeholders, including civil society organisations, activists, policymakers, and educators. Advocating for women's rights and gender equity can influence decision-makers, change policy, and drive systemic transformations.

Ultimately, liberating mindsets and fostering women empowerment is a long-term and complex process. It requires commitment and collective action from all segments of society to challenge prevailing norms and build a more inclusive and equitable future for everyone.

## FINAL WORDS

It is fitting to end this novella with words of **HOPE** for the future of young people:

Hope that each person can experience personal wellbeing and welfare as one desires.

Hope that young women, especially female students, will one day have equitable opportunities to realise their agency and fulfil their potential.

Hope for societies to see women as human beings to be nurtured and respected.

Hope that girls will work hard to become who they desire to be and to do what they value.

Hope that future generations of women are empowered through the efforts and sacrifices of those that have gone before.

Hope for the dismantling of patriarchal legacies in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa.

And finally,

Hope to realise a better future for all young women and men.

## Further reading

AFFIRM Woman - a website that promotes and provides learning and development opportunities for young women and female entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa.

An Assessment of the Management of Students' Welfare Services in Universities in Three Geopolitical Zones in Northern Part of Nigeria. Professor A. A. Mahadi (2007). Unpublished doctoral thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Female students for political leadership in Nigeria: mirroring possibilities? Zibah Nwako and Oluwadamilola Akintewe. The School of Education Blog, University of Bristol, 13 January 2023.

In Our Own Voices - Blogposts that amplify the interesting ideas and different life experiences of African women and girls, narrated or written in their own words.

The Global Youth Wellbeing Index collects and links information about youth to evaluate and compare the wellbeing of young people around the world. Source: <https://www.iyfnet.org/library/2017-global-youth-wellbeing-index>

## About the authors



Zibah Nwako, PhD is a Senior Research Associate at the School of Education, University of Bristol, United Kingdom. This graphic novella is based on the findings of her doctoral thesis.

She is passionate about gender justice, students' wellbeing and welfare, personal development for African women, and youth entrepreneurship.

Find more real-life stories in Zibah's blog In Our Own Voices at her website: <https://www.zibahnwako.com/>



## About the authors



Nathalie Ukwu is a Mass Communication graduate of the University of Nigeria Nsukka expresses herself through all forms of writing. This fascination started from childhood when she used to write comic plots and short stories.

When she is not writing, she is creating tasty cakes at her minibakery, reading, watching movies, or practising her other passion- Journalism. Nathalie currently resides in Enugu, Nigeria and works as Chief Correspondent with Afia Television.



Ijeoma Ossi is a freelance illustrator, with a background in Law and an M.A. in Human Rights and International Relations.

She is the project illustrator responsible for turning the thesis topic into comic form.

Her work is available at [Art of Achalugo](#) and she tweets [here](#) about art, life, and TV shows.

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### Empowering Voices: Breaking Barriers in Nigerian Campuses

**Unclipped Wings** is a graphic novella that narrates the struggles of female students at UniSEn, a typical Nigerian tertiary education institution. Returning after an 8-month ASUU strike, Accounting student and aspiring SUG President, Chinwe faces challenges that stem from living in a patriarchal culture. Her friends also experience hardships, each striving to survive against the odds.

The novella offers researched insights into gender discrimination, student welfare and wellbeing. Solutions are proposed to enable female students to thrive within and beyond the academic environment. **Unclipped Wings** champions the voice and potential of the young woman, and advocates for her liberation from gender-biased societal constraints. It is a must-read for students, parents, educators, and policymakers.

