

Style Her Empowered (SHE)



Style Her Empowered (SHE) was founded by Payton McGriff to empower girls and women in Togo through education and employment. Payton initially aimed to teach girls to sew their own school uniforms to keep them in school. After partnering with Dr. Romuald Afatchao and visiting Togo, she realised a broader need. This led to the creation of SHE's programs, which now provide uniforms, employment, and education for women, fostering long-term community partnerships and transformative change.

Join us as we interview founder Payton McGriff...

How did the idea for Style Her Empowered (SHE) first come about, and what inspired you to focus on education and employment for girls and women in Togo?

The inspiration for SHE came from the book, *Half the Sky*, that talks about the plight of girls and women worldwide. The book also emphasises how educating girls is crucial for driving progress. One key point was how providing a new school uniform can be one of the most cost-effective ways to keep girls in school. During my final semester at university, I took an entrepreneurship class to explore the idea of starting a nonprofit to teach girls how to sew the school uniforms they need to attend school. I was introduced to a professor at my university, Dr. Romuald Afatchao, originally from Notsé Togo, Africa. After listening to the idea, he said he thought it would be a good fit in his home town and he would partner with me to start SHE on the condition that I travel to Togo first and meet with local community members. Eleven days later, I was in Togo researching the barriers to education for girls and meeting with as many students from local junior highs and high schools as possible.

Who did you meet when you initially went there?

I met one incredible young woman, Elolo, who became the inspiration for SHE. I asked to spend a day with Elolo to experience what life is like for a girl in Togo. We woke up at 3:30am to begin preparing the rice her mother sells to earn income for her family. Then we did all of the household chores, got her brothers ready for school, and cleaned the kitchen, all before Elolo rushed to get ready for school herself. When she got home from school, we did that routine again until the sun went down. This experience led me to realise that girls don't have any extra hours in the day to learn to sew, so that is when we widened our scope to hire local seamstresses. I realised that the seamstresses we were hiring were girls who didn't have a chance to go to school in the first place, so we created our 'Paid-to-Learn' employment program to provide both gainful employment and adult education for the women we employ.

Could you share about the impact of the SHE uniform and how it contributes to sustainability and empowerment?

Our school uniforms are designed to expand six sizes and up to a foot in length so they can adjust to a girls' body over 3 years of growth. Because of this growth, each SHE uniform that grows can replace the need for 5 standard uniforms, so by providing 8,095 SHE uniforms to girls, we've reduced the need for more than 40,000 school uniforms. In addition, our school uniforms are zero-waste, meaning we recycle 100% of the fabric off-cuts during our production process into reusable menstrual pads for our girls. When a SHE uniform is ready to be "retired" we repurpose the fabric into backpacks or other usable products for girls and women.



What are some of the key challenges you've faced in implementing SHE's programs, and how have you overcome them?

Initially, the rural villages we partner with were sceptical about us coming into their community because they had been disappointed by the unfulfilled promises of non-governmental organisations in the past. Our local team of women, including our Togolese Executive Director, Françoise, have done an incredible job of earning the trust of the community partners by showing them that we are dedicated to partnering with them for the long-term. Our team meets regularly with our community leaders, parents, and students to listen to their goals and challenges, and we design our programs to meet them where they are. It's led to incredible partnerships that have flourished over the last 5 years.

How do you measure success in your programs, and what stories have stood out most to you?

Our program offers holistic support to the girls we serve, so we try to measure the success of our students holistically too. We measure literacy and numeracy of students, increases in confidence, increase in agency and participation in decision making, and retention rates in school. Every one of our students is writing an incredible story, but I think Elolo's story is such a powerful representation of what our girls can do when they are educated and empowered. When I met Elolo, her parents had already made the painful decision to pull her out of school at the age of 15 so her brothers could continue. Elolo became the first girl sponsored by SHE in 2017, and after 4 years, she became the first high school graduate of her family. Soon after, she joined our full-time staff as a Program Coordinator. Fast forward to today, and she is now the Assistant Director of SHE Togo, and she has helped recruit and inspire thousands of girls in our program across 21 villages. Elolo is a role model to every girl in our program who can see themselves in her, and she is the definition of resilience and persistence. ✕

Links



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