



## **ADA Live! Episode 124: Global Disability Rights and the International Day of Persons with Disabilities**

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**Guest:** Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame, Chair of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

**Moderator:** Barry Whaley, Director of the Southeast ADA Center

**Host:** Peter Blanck, Ph.D., J.D., Chairman, Burton Blatt Institute, University Professor, Syracuse University

**Recording:** [adalive.org/episodes/episode-124](https://adalive.org/episodes/episode-124)

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**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame:** Hello I am Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame, and you are listening to ADAlive.

**4 Wheel City:** Yo. All right. Let's roll. Let's go.

**Barry Whaley**

Hi everybody on behalf of the Southeast ADA Center at the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University in the ADA National Network. I want to welcome you to ADA live. I'm Barry Whaley. I'm director of the Southeast ADA Center. As a reminder listening audience. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, you can use our online forum anytime at [adalive.org](https://adalive.org). Or you can call the Southeast ADA Center at 404-541-9001. And remember, those calls are always free and they're confidential. Each year the United Nations recognizes December 3 as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. This year's theme is united in action to rescue and achieve the sustainable development goals for with and by people with

disabilities. And we are so very honored to have as our guest today, Gertrude or Getty Oforiwa Fefoame. Getty is the chair of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities or the CRPD, which sets out the fundamental human rights of people with disabilities all over the world. Getty also works as the global advocacy manager for social inclusion for Sightsavers, a global nonprofit organization that works in more than 30 countries to prevent blindness, and fight for the rights of people with disabilities. In this episode, we'll discuss the work and the mission of the United Nations CRPD and highlight some of the important issues facing people with disabilities around the world. We're happy to have as our host today, the chairman of the Burton Blatt Institute, Dr. Peter Blanck, and Peter, I'll turn the program over to you.

### **Peter Blanck**

Thank you, Barry and Getty, if I may, it's quite an honor to be with you. Your work is touching so many millions of lives around the world. To begin with Getty, perhaps tell us a little bit about your background, your disability and your career history.

### **Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

Thank you, Peter. So Getty comes from Ghana, a country in West Africa. And I am a person with visual impairments, in fact, totally blind. As a growing child, in a district community in Ghana, after being enrolled in school to age 10, I realized I couldn't read from the blackboard. It immediately took intervention from the health specialist check up. And I was given reading glasses. And by age 14, I couldn't use it again. And remained in mainstream school without adequate support, because Ghana didn't have inclusive education at that point. Fast forward, after secondary school or level, I had to enroll at a segregated residential school for the blind. And I see the stigma and discrimination I've faced from a teacher's some friends that is going to school was not enough. I really experienced social barrier with some encounter, that almost made me feel like ending my life. But I had an intervention with another visually impaired person who wasn't at school. She was at Teachers Training College. And that changed my attitude that told me I had a future that introduced me to the organization of persons with disabilities from the blind. And that made me know that the role of persons with disabilities in the lives of others is important. That is how I moved on with my educational career, moved on to be a professional teacher, and then moved into development as have done so much volunteering for organizations of persons with disabilities in Ghana, and Africa. So in 2006, I

joined Sightsavers after leaving a development agency for the Well Blind Union, and this is where I have been, and so have risen through the ranks of different career responsibilities. And now, a global advocacy Manager. I'm married with three daughters.

**Peter Blanck**

So thank you, Getty. As our listeners may know, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which is abbreviated as the UN CRPD, or the CRPD, is an international human rights law that sets out fundamental human rights of people with disabilities. Tell us a little bit about the UN CRPD and what your role is with them.

**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

Thank you, Peter, their Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities CRPD. It's the first treaty that is in place to protect and promote the rights of persons disabilities worldwide. It encompasses the already existing treaties, including that for children and women, and recognizes that of the civil and political rights as well. And at the moment, the treaty has been ratified by 188 countries. It has a committee that monitors the implementation of the treaty. The committee is made up of 18 members elected from anywhere from the wild, as experts, be persons with disabilities, and some not persons with disabilities. I joined this committee in 2018, after losing an election in 2016, and got re elected in 2022. And was elected to the Chair of the Committee on the sixth of March 2022. As the chair with leading with a bureau, it also has a secretariat, and my committee members working and interacting with other treaty bodies, the entire human rights commission, and organizations of persons with disabilities, allies and other civil society organizations, we work towards the monitoring by engaging states. The Convention also has an optional protocol, which allows submission of communication by individuals. And it goes through a critical criteria, because you should have exhausted all national opportunities before it will be admitted into the committee's work asset. Communication. And that's fine and necessary. We also conduct inquiries,

**Peter Blanck**

Are there differences or similarities between our Americans with Disabilities Act and the UNCRPD?

**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

Oh, yes and no, I would say so fundamentally. And as you know, if you're more than I do, the Americans disability arts is long lived. And it's been a model for many national legislations on disability, and even part of it as are the CRPD as well. It is a very strong anti legislative instrument. And that is very healthy and helpful. The C RPD mirrors some of the areas, but it's also enlarges and broadens that emphasize the areas of substantive observations of equality. given opportunities arise for states to introduce us like affirmative action. The CRPD is also less on the impairment. It broadens out the scope of what disability could be, and concentrates on the social barriers that impedes on the equalization of opportunities of persons with disabilities. So because there's so much mirror I, I really and not only me, most of us on the committee wonder why America has not ratified the CRPD because it's just inline. Of course, we understand that is not only the CRPD that America hasn't ratified. But now that the CRPD is getting into Universal ratification, how great it would be. If we get America ratified. Yes, we look forward to that. And together, I think we can get there

**Peter Blanck**

And many of us share your sentiment. What are the challenges you face as chair and generally by the UNCRPD today?

**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

Hmm, good question. The CRPD, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, has been ratified by 188 state parties. It's set to be the fastest growing treaty or convention. And although we have some delays, in some submission of initial reports, there's quite a reasonable submission of reports, but, we have a great backlog. We have over 43 Initial reports that we haven't been able to review. And think 29 periodic ones. This is mainly because we have grown in number as a as a state party since 2014. But our meeting times haven't changed. We have a maximum of two sessions of seven weeks. And no matter how hard we work, we are not able to pull together enough time, we would have required a third session, like other treaty bodies, who have reached that level of ratification. But we haven't gotten that yet. We are working on it. We are engaging with the office of the Human Rights Commission and all who need to be involved. And hopefully, there may be some consideration going forward

**Peter Blanck**

So what do you think are the major achievements of the UN CRPD to date?

**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

The other part is how would challenge with phase is effective and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities not into our work, but not sufficiently involved into other treaty bodies works, and also mainstreaming of disability. So disability is not yet sufficiently across cutscene phenomenon within many of the treaty bodies, we are working on that we are creating closer relationship with the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Committee on the Rights of elimination of all discrimination against women, the Committee Against Torture, and we will continue to build this collaboration. And we are also raising this question with the human rights commissioner and the entire human rights office. Come into the question of what we have achieved. That we have 188 ratification is great. We also have had about half of the state dialogues with maximum participation of states and also meaningful participation of organizations of persons with disabilities to a reasonable extent. We have been able to develop eight general comments from accessibility through to work and employment. And these general comments, elaborate and explains the articles of the convention to be used of rent friendly to states and civil society organizations, including organizations of persons with disabilities. At the moment, we are on the ninth general comment which is on Article 11, of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on situation of risk in humanitarian emergencies. We have also been able to build some collaboration, as I said earlier with some of their treaty bodies, particularly that of the children and women. And to the extent that we have been successful in issuing combined statements relevant to children with disabilities, and women and girls with disabilities with these treaty bodies. We have also been able to develop guidelines on the deinstitutionalization. We did observe during the COVID-19 issues that many passive disabilities really were disadvantaged, particularly those who are in institutions. And so, the issue of deinstitutionalization has been intensified, we have a guideline, and we are raising awareness and engaging state parties and all others, to join in ensuring that we dismantle institutions. It is not the best. Persons with disabilities, need to live either community and choose where they wish to live.

**Peter Blanck**

What do you hope to achieve by the end of your term in 2026, as chairperson,

**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

I might end up repeating some of the things I've said earlier, because there are important. Strengthening collaboration with other treaty bodies towards mainstreaming of disability issues within the treaty bodies work. I also looking at strengthening the relationship between Geneva and New York. So for example, the sustainable development goals you and I know, cannot be achieved at a pace where persons with disabilities have been left behind. And most of the discussions are in New York. And New York with different facets, including the team of the Conference of State parties, their team that works on their park, the team that works on the summit for the future. And so I'm taking the time to engage the different facets. Also lessen some of my committee members and the bureau health in this engagement. We are looking to ensuring that what has been achieved on disability within the declaration that took place in September will just be the beginning and will grow. It will also grow to the extent that disability becomes more integrated and include that would be the best way within the work in New York. And the Human Rights arena should be seen as the second side of the coin of development so that the human rights observance and Sustainable Development Goals go hand in hand. And these are some of the things I wish to achieve, including improving the participation of persons with disabilities within the human rights initiatives.

**Peter Blanck**

Thank you, Getty for this great information. I want to remind our listening audience, ADAlive. If you have questions about this topic or any other ADA live topics, you can submit your questions online at [www.adalive.org](http://www.adalive.org). Or call the Southeast ADA Center at 404-541-9001. And now, a word from this episode sponsor the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

**Voice Over**

The Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities CRPD is an international human rights treaty of the United Nations intended to protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. Parties to the Convention are required to promote, protect and ensure the full enjoyment of human rights by persons with disabilities and ensure that persons with this abilities and joyful equality under the law. The convention serves as the major catalysts in the Global Disability Rights Movement, enabling a shift from viewing persons with disabilities as objects of charity, medical treatment, and social protection towards viewing them as full and

equal members of society with human rights. That convention was the first UN human rights treaty of the 21st century.

**Peter Blanck**

Welcome back, everyone. I'm Peter Blanck chairman of the Burton Blatt Institute. Our guest is Getty Chair of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with a disability who also works for an organization called Sightsavers as their global advocacy manager for social inclusion. Tell us a little bit about what Sightsavers does Getty please.

**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

Sightsavers is an international development organization, who works in over 30 countries in lower and middle income groups. We work towards prevention of avoidable blindness, treatment and elimination of neglected tropical diseases, and fights for the promotion and equalization of opportunities for passive disabilities. Sightsavers is very interested in the work that I do, not only with the direct, but also considers the work on the CRPD level as an important role of Sightsavers. Before my election, when there was almost no woman, there was actually only one women left on the Committee on the Rights of person disabilities, Sightsavers worked with me and other allies on an equal world campaign, ensuring that women are elected onto the committee. And I'll come back at this stage to say that one of the achievements of the committee is attaining gender parity. And we'll take this opportunity to say that it is my hope and wish that we maintain this. So the 2024 election is just around the corner. And we are working with all hands on deck. And using this opportunity to let all others know that we should not step back on the participation of women on the committee. And for that matter, the participation of women and girls have their rightful places in development and the human rights arena.

**Peter Blanck**

So this is something you hope to see continue beyond your tenure as chair of the CRPD. What other future aspirations do you have for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities?

**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

Yes, that the political will affects will be heightened, so that the protection and promotion of rights of persons with disabilities will really be attained. That's quite a level of lip service. And the journey is slow, although we've attained some level, but it's too slow, too slow for the growing majority of persons with disabilities. Let us for instance, reflect on the SDGs. as I've just said earlier, let us reflect on their risks. The U N. risk survey for the midterm. We haven't come far especially as disabilities, for the observance of our inclusion in the risk reduction strategy at all. And our accessibility issues and reasonable accommodation has still a long way to go. Adding to some of the things I've said earlier, these are some of the future aspirations I have that the CRPD committee will continue to grow, build stronger relationships with states, get higher commitment of states that using that general comments we have provided, and use them so that the rights of persons with disabilities will be better promoted and protected, and ableism will be reduced.

**Peter Blanck**

So that's clearly an important message you have for governments around the world. What do you think they should do beyond this?

**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

To implement via local processes and structures on disability inclusion. Because when they don't do that, society loses out. And once society loses out the plans and efforts of all kinds, from work and employment, education, health equity; name them, all become reduced, if not a failure. So what I hope that states will do is to be more attentive, and more particular, to inclusion of persons with disabilities, including women and girls with disabilities, and ensuring meaningful participation of organizations that represent voices of persons with disabilities. And also be more ready to report and report in a more quality and accurate way to the CRPD committee. And together with all allies, donor partners, and organizations of persons with disabilities and individuals with disabilities, build a better future for all.

**Peter Blanck**

Thank you for this great information you shared with our listeners today about the important work that you do to improve the lives of persons with disabilities around the world. Would you like to leave our listeners with any final comments or any thoughts to share?



**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

I want to say that we have seen considerable effort by state parties at this time, however, progress remains to be made. We are not where we need to be. And therefore, I and the Committee on persons with disabilities call on state parties to reenforce their anti-discrimination frameworks to develop community based inclusive and accessible services so that we can better address violence, exploitation, and abuse against persons with disabilities. And also to ensure the persons with disabilities are heard through meaningful consultation and the active involvement in decision making. We are at a critical juncture to ensure that persons with disabilities are not left behind in development. The summit of the future represents a unique opportunity. And to that end, it preys on opportunity for transformative as a related and disability inclusive action. We can't lose this. I think together we can see.

**Peter Blanck**

Thank you, Getty with leadership like you're conveying, I think we will achieve. And I think the movement to improve the lives of people with disabilities around the world will continue to evolve positively. I want to thank you very much for your time. And it's really been an honor to speak with you even briefly today. I'll turn it back to Barry for the closing.

**Barry Whaley**

Thank you, Peter. I appreciate that. Getty thank you for being with us today. I am in the most enviable position of wishing the chair of the CRPD of Happy International Day of People with Disabilities day in for on December 3 And I wish you every success when the States Parties convenes again next June. Listeners you can find a recording of this podcast on our website [adalive.org](http://adalive.org) along with useful resources to learn more about the disability rights work in the United Nations, and to celebrate December 3 as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. You can access more ADA Live episodes with archived audio, accessible transcripts and resources on our website [adalive.org](http://adalive.org). Remember, you can listen to ADA live on the SoundCloud channel just search for SoundCloud forward slash ADALive. Download ADA live to your mobile device on your podcast app by searching for ADA live. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, again, you can use our online forum at [adalive.org](http://adalive.org) or contact your Regional ADA Center at 1-800-949-4232. And those calls are always free and confidential. ADA Live is a program of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and is a collaboration with a Disability Inclusive

Employment Policy, Rehabilitation Research and Training center. Our producer is Celestia Ohrazda, with Cheri Hofman., Mary Morder, Marsha Schwanke, Chase Coleman ,and me I'm Barry Whaley. Our music is from four wheel city the movement for improvement We also invite you to tune into our companion podcast Disability Rights today for in depth discussion on important court cases that shape disability rights and the Americans with Disabilities Act. You can learn more at [DisabilityRightsToday.org](http://DisabilityRightsToday.org) Thanks for being with us. We'll see you next episode.

#### **4 Wheel City**

They watching. They don't want us be part of the city, man. They put all these steps, man. All these curbs we can't get over. All these inaccessible stores. 4 Wheel City. They don't want us here. We'll survive and we're going to make our own place. Our own world. The 4 Wheel City-

[End of Transcript]

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