Name of Candidate: Mrs. Gertrude Ofiriwa Fefoame  
State Party Nominating Candidate: Ghana

1. Describe any experience you have working on women’s rights and particularly any experience you have integrating women and girls with disabilities into your broader work on disability rights.

My experience in gender includes policy formulation, implementation and monitoring, establishing and capacity building of women’s groups and advocating for the inclusion of women and girls with disabilities in ongoing policies and programmes. I participated in the development of the Beijing Platform For Action in 1995 and its subsequent reviews, including at the Africa Preparatory Conference in 2014 and Beijing +20/CSW 59 in New York in 2015. I have been a strong advocate of having a gender component within disability acts, policies, frameworks and strategies in collaboration with disability organisations in different countries, including Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia. I have been instrumental in the establishment, strengthening and leading of women’s groups since 1981 at national, continental and global levels. I was instrumental in the establishment of the first women’s groups of the Ghana Blind Union, and later the women’s committee of Ghana Federation of Disability Organisations and the African Union of the Blind (AFUB). I have been offering training to women’s groups (from countries including Ghana, Nigeria, Benin, Congo Brazzaville and Zambia) on self-awareness/confidence building, legislation, reproductive health and other interest areas through workshops. Currently, I lead the gender component in training on CRPD and SDGs.

2. Do you think there are human rights abuses that disproportionately or uniquely affect women and girls with disabilities, as compared to men and boys with disabilities and non-disabled women and girls? If so, what do you think are the most urgent human rights issues disproportionately or uniquely affecting women and girls with disabilities?

Yes, I do think women and girls with disabilities face higher risks of human rights abuses, compared to non-disabled women and girls, and men and boys with disabilities. Misconceptions and barriers mean that women with disabilities experience a threefold daily challenge: they are women, they are people with disabilities and they are women with disabilities. These challenges are multiplied if they are from developing countries or under-developed areas, are refugees or have been forced from their homes. Some of the most urgent human rights issues that affect women with disabilities include the heightened risk of violence. Globally, women are more likely to experience physical, sexual and psychological violence compared to men. In the case of women and girls with disabilities, they experience gender-based violence at disproportionately higher rates and in unique forms as compared to non-disabled women and girls, owing to discrimination and stigma based on both gender and disability; there is research backing this. Women with disabilities also face specific barriers accessing healthcare, particularly sexual and reproductive healthcare. This may be because of inaccessibility and stereotyping, where women
and girls with disabilities (particularly intellectual disabilities) face barriers to sexual and reproductive health services and to information on comprehensive sex education. Health professionals often lack the knowledge required to treat women with disabilities effectively, and some openly discriminate against pregnant women with disabilities. Maternity wards are often not accessible. Abuse is also common, with staff sometimes poking fun at women and girls with disabilities and asking how they ever got pregnant.

Women and girls with disabilities also face challenges related to representation and participation. Physical and societal barriers often prevent women and girls with disabilities from participating in decision-making processes and representation on decision-making bodies at rural, district, city and national levels. Negative attitudes from families and community members as well as inaccessible physical environments can weaken self-esteem and prevent women with disabilities from contributing to decision-making processes, which results in decisions made that may not be responsive to their needs.

In education, girls with disabilities are less likely to complete primary school due to lack of access and marginalisation. According to the 2011 World Report on Disability, only 41.7 per cent of girls with disabilities complete primary school, compared to 50.6 per cent of men and boys with disabilities and 52.9 per cent of women and girls without disabilities.

3. **What obligations do you think States have under the CRPD and other human rights treaties to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise sexual and reproductive autonomy? Do you think States should be allowed to place any limitations on that autonomy, and if so, what limitations?**

States should not place any limitations on the sexual and reproductive autonomy of women with disabilities.

States have an obligation under the CRPD and other human rights provisions to ensure that persons with disabilities, and particular women and girls with disabilities, can fully enjoy all rights and freedoms on an equal basis with others. In this way, States must ensure that the rights of girls and women with disabilities are respected throughout all treaty provisions and national legislations, to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of women with disabilities (as illustrated in article 6 of the CRPD, which has further been elaborated under General Comment 3 with illustrations to all other relevant articles of the CRPD).

States are obligated to ensure that existing laws, regulations, customs and practices that result in discrimination against women with disabilities are abolished. These include laws and customs that prevent women with disabilities from getting married, or forcing them to marry against their will, forced sterilisation, taking away their right to access family planning procedures, etc.

Where there are no laws or policies to ensure women and girls with disabilities have reproductive and sexual autonomy, States are to formulate laws and policies that will allow for this in line with the CRPD and other treaties. The interests and rights of women and girls with disabilities must also be mainstreamed into existing government laws, policies and plans where reproductive and sexual health rights are enshrined, and when States are unable to implement these, women and girls with disabilities should be supported for access to justice. In addition, State oversight on non-state actors should ensure that women and girls with disabilities are included in all their programmes.
4. What do you believe are States’ obligations to address gender-based violence under the CRPD and other human rights treaties? Are there ways you think the CRPD Committee could do more to address this issue with States?

States have the obligation to ensure that the rights of women and girls with disabilities are not infringed upon. This means States parties must take all appropriate steps to ensure discrimination on the basis of sex and/or disability by any person, organization or private entity is eliminated. States parties also have the obligation to work towards preventing violence or violations of human rights, protecting victims and witnesses from violations, investigating, prosecuting and punishing persons found culpable, and providing access to redress and reparations where human rights violations occur. For this to be achieved, training of all levels of professionals in the justice sector on disability needs to be undertaken so that these professionals, from police officers to court clerks (to mention a few), know how to handle cases involving women and girls with disabilities so they can also have equal access to justice. In communities in countries like Ghana (where there are traditional justice systems), traditional leaders and their attendants also have to be trained. Information regarding the justice system and rights of persons with disabilities must be in accessible formats and in local languages so they are accessible to persons with disabilities who mostly live in rural areas. The CRPD, in its review of States and country visits, should continue to encourage States parties to put in place effective remedies for women with disabilities who have been subjected to violence. The Committee must also work closely together with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Committee on the Rights of Children and the Committee Against Torture, as examples, in addressing this issue.

5. What steps could the CRPD Committee take to better ensure the participation of organizations of women and/or girls with disabilities in its activities, including in its reviews of States and the adoption of General Comments?

The CRPD Committee must encourage women’s groups to present alternative reports during country reviews, in its general call for submissions from DPOs and CSOs. Currently, the development of a General Comment on DPO participation is underway by the CRPD committee, and women with disabilities and their organisations must be encouraged to take advantage of this and contribute to it on how they would like to be included in the activities of the Committee. The CRPD committee should continue to encourage States to include women with disabilities and their organisations as part of the consultations for the development of the states’ reports. DPOs must also be encouraged in their consultations and presentations to the Committee, to involve with women and girls with disabilities. The Committee should take advantage during reviews to draw attention to the issue of inclusion of women with disabilities for the implementation of the Concluding Observations, leading to the development of the next report. The Committee can also issue periodic statements pointing to the continuous need for the involvement of women and girls with disabilities. For example, following the results of the 2016 CRPD Committee elections, the Committee issued a statement encouraging all to work towards increasing the nomination of women candidates. In response, in 2018 there are 17 women candidates. In view of this, statements may be issued on critically identified issues that require attention to enhance participation of women and girls with disabilities.
6. Do you think the CRPD Committee should be working with other UN treaty monitoring bodies and human rights mechanisms to advance the rights of women and girls with disabilities? If so, with which bodies and mechanisms and on what issues?

Yes, the CRPD Committee should be working with other UN treaty bodies and human rights mechanisms. This is because disability is cross-cutting, which means all other treaty bodies’ work must be of interest to the Committee. The CRPD Committee needs to ensure that all treaty bodies effectively include issues on disability, especially issues of women and girls with disabilities. It is essential that the Committee works with all treaty bodies to advance the rights of women and girls with disabilities, as they face multiple discrimination in the exercise and enjoyment of their rights on multiple and intersecting grounds: on the basis of gender, disability, age, race, indigenous background and immigrant status. This means that their issues must feature in the work of all other treaty bodies. My suggestion is that we intensify this work through focal points on each committee, through the biannual meetings of the treaty body chairs, and through continued technical support on disability inclusion.