Promoting gender equality and women empowerment is the third Millennium Development Goal – MDG. Achieving this goal is making sure all the other MDGs are achieved, now that good implementation of policies and strategies drawn for achieving these MDGs goals may only be properly implemented if gender equality is strategically taken into consideration. This is the reason why promoting gender equality and women empowerment can also be seen as a bridge to justice promotion between men and women. So, taking into consideration that justice is a relation between individuals (man and woman), we are going to look at different strategies through which gender equality can be promoted in our real, multilingual and multicultural world. Here, we are going to look at the existing tools designed for promoting gender equality in the international level, as well as real situations of gender inequality in our daily life. Therefore, taking into consideration that there is a need of social change in our current societies, we can foresee possible strategies to be used in the implementation of policies and strategies that are drawn for achieving gender equality and women empowerment goals.

Talking about gender equality is not talking about sexual differences, but its talking about given features, perceptions or ideas that are attributed to a man or a woman in a given social context. Taking into consideration that social contexts are different, the concept of gender may vary from one society to another. So, gender has to do with one’s life, with interpersonal relations and even with culture. Gender has to do with power because it is an arena where we struggle for shortening power distance (Hofestede et al, 2002), for identity and justice, so as to guarantee survival in our societies. Power may be financial or material, wealth may be seen as the number of animals and children (in some traditional families), and prestige can be seen as the social valorisation. All of these elements are used to establish hierarchy in our social contexts. That is, hierarchy is established from the social position’s point of view. Here, what has been observed is that women generally have lower social positions in their communities, as well as in the family context, where there is no gender equality.

Talking about gender equality is talking about equal opportunities in the family, community, workplace, school, decision making process and all the rest of our social spheres. We can say, for instance, that we have gender equality when the majority of women have access to public space which is, historically and culturally, seen as an exclusive space for men. We can also talk about
gender equality when men and women activities have the same social value, when there are no rules that exclude women (leaving them in a subordinate position in relation to men) or when we have the same number of girls and boys in a primary school. Generally speaking, we can say we have gender equality when women and men earn equally and enjoy equally all of what they work for. Taking into consideration that examples of gender equality are endless and contextual, we can finally say that we have gender equality when we have women and men in the professional and political positions in an indiscriminate manner (Kabeer, 2005).

The fact that gender perceptions vary from one society to another shows that activities aimed at fulfilling the gender equality promise have to be carried in different ways, taking into consideration that we are living in a multilingual and multicultural world. As gender inequality has been regarded (or is still regarded) as normal in some societies (Connel, 2009), promoting gender equality not only is a bridge to justice, but also a way of fighting against mentalities built throughout several years and, it has to do with social change which, in reality, may have followers and opponents. So, if we want to promote sustainable development, we need to make sure we all follow our social changes, as we all know that time changes, needs change, mind-sets change, the same way language and culture change.

The third MDG, gender equality and women empowerment, is the result of the need of enabling women to be equal to men in what concerns rights and opportunities. We all know that men and women are not yet sharing rights and opportunities in an equal manner in all our social, economic, professional, academic and political spheres. The inequalities observed in the relation between men and women, attached to poverty, illiteracy, sexual transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS, hegemonic masculinities, weak or even lack of implementation of conventions, protocols and laws designed for protecting and promoting women, among other reasons, are a real menace to women’s agency (ability), social inclusion and to gender equality and women empowerment. Apart from men’s power over women, there are different reasons which explain the increase of gender inequality and gender-based violence against women: drugs, envy, unemployment, sexuality, physical and psychological problems, social context and family cultural background (some women believe that when a man beats a woman, he shows love). There are also stumbling blocks for the protection efforts undertaken by governments so far, just like silence among sexual victims, because of fear of communities’ connotations and complicity.
Women’s economic dependence and limited or even lack of access to human rights protection services are the other stumbling blocks in our current world.

Governments have been signing protocols, conventions and agreeing on laws in search for different ways of slowing down the increase of gender inequality and gender-based violence in our societies, but different community projects are still not corresponding to the desired implementation outcome. It was in this context that the world had several international conferences in Beijing, Cairo, Vienna, Copenhagen, among others places. After the fourth world conference about women, which took place in Beijing, in 1995, we cannot see the reason why we still have shortage of efforts in building more orphanages for children, girls and women under several risks, living with HIV/AIDS or war victims, so that they can have shelter, counselling and the consequent rehabilitation. After the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ratified by different states in 1979, women rights should be always protected, but it is still a long way forward to go before getting there. What happens is a sort of a mere promise and, even when some conventions are implemented, women are not even involved. The practice shows that women, girls and children have to be involved if the aim is solving problems that affect them, because they are the ones who know what they want and, the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of women empowerment projects have to make sure all community members are involved.

After having the UN Division that deals with gender issues and the UN High Commissary for Refugees, we should not still have psychological, physical and gender violence problems among refugees all over the world. In 1999, when UNIFEM had the initiative of transforming 25 November as the International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women was calling our attention to the need of eliminating gender-based violence against women, meantime, reducing poverty and HIV/AIDS among women and girls, guaranteeing gender equality and democratic environment, (Sandis, 2006).

Summit in South Africa, governments signed the Gender and Development Protocol that underlines women’s participation in decision making process. South African, Mozambican, Angolan, Ugandan, Tanzanian, Kenyan and Zambian women recently met in Mozambique and created a Women’s Network in order to promote entrepreneurship among them. Among several existing problems, they underlined limited access to credit and markets, weak participation in highly competitive markets and lack of linkages to the existing international organizations. For motivated women who have good will and good intend like these, we should make sure they are well skilled to face the world of entrepreneurship, which looks to be rapidly growing in several countries. This means that we should make sure that they are skilled at negotiation techniques, business management, access to technology, leadership, as well as knowledge about business plans. As we can see, there are many tools with which we can work, although implementation is not as easy as a promise. So far, we all understand the need of making sure women are professionally skilled so as to partake in the process of sustainable development in the family, community, national and international level.

With professional skills, women can become entrepreneurs or even get highly paid jobs. In one or another option, they get into another drama. Apart from the traditional culture, at workplaces we still have internal and external competitiveness, in which women need to be competent enough so as to avoid disadvantages. In these kinds of competitions, financial power has been creating institution’s fragmentations and, here is where women find themselves in a dilemma, now that a competitive environment does not fit with what they are expected to be, submissive and calms. This shows that these days all we need is a transformational culture, in which women have access to training and an environment in which the relations are not traditional and the work itself does not depend on sexual differences (Itzin & Newman, 1995).

So, we can understand that self-employment is extremely important for women’s freedom and for decision-making power in all social spheres, but the monthly income women get from self-employment or any employment sometimes is the source of another problem. I mean, family income has always grounded a space for gender violence to take place in several families and, this shows that not all women enjoy their monthly income. Enabling them to move away from this dependence cycle should be the challenge of all of us, the world’s challenge.
At this point we all understand that for achieving gender equality as it was stated in the MDG3, we need to understand that there are many warfronts to choose: fulfilling our role as leaders, making sure conventions, laws and protocols are turned into implementation projects, promoting women networks, involving women in project’s design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, training them on professional skills, opting for a transformational culture, freeing women to enjoy what they work for, meantime, promoting social change and justice.

Furthermore, we have to grasp that social change has to be promoted within the communities because, as one said, change itself lies within the communities themselves. This means that we have to involve community structures and institutions whenever we want to implement any kind of project. As Para-Mallam (2006) noted, customary values, norms, laws and religion affect women aspirations and reinforce their subordinate position, as well as legitimizing man’s dominant role.

Now, imagine a community where religion is also involved in a leadership project. Unfortunately, religious NGOs concerned with reforms in gender relations are not being satisfactorily sponsored because they lack religious and political trust. Anyway, consider that change itself is not just material, it is primarily psychological. That is to say, we must work to significantly reinforce community attitudes and systematic structures before true gender equality can be achieved. By doing so, we will be promoting social change and justice for the benefit of women and men.

In our community, people need to believe they can make change before they can actually start making it. Here, religion is important because it contributes to social education, now that it provides community members with efficient ways of social control, keeping in the mind of church-goers what is wrong and what is right. Through rites, religion is not only a bridge between ancestors and future generations, but it is also a set of norms, behaviours’ regulations and so forth. In this community, preachers forget all about Jezebel (King Arab’s wife), who dominated the husband and lead all Hebrews to idolatry and to sexual immorality and subjected them to tyranny, Kings (1 and 2). All they remember and preach is about Ester (4:9-17) or the “star” (who rescued Jewish people), the queen of the Persian Empire. To keep challenging the men-biased selection of biblical scriptures they also remind people of the so-called mother of Israel, Deborah, the judge, prophetess and a military leader, Judges 4:4-7. Deborah’s authority
and responsibility was as powerful as Moses (who received from God the Ten Commandments, Exodus 32:19) and Samuel (who brought peace in Israel for over 40 years, 1 Samuel 7:2-17).

Apart from leadership promotion among women, community institutions, community-based organizations, public and private organizations like the church, have to forget the word “taboo” and contribute in HIV/AIDS reduction and reproductive health improvement. Generally, the facts which lead to youth pregnancy and HIV/AIDS infection may be explained through sexual abuse, violence, exploration, multiple partners, abortion and maternal mortality, genital mutilation, incest, traffic, prostitution, abandonment and survival in poverty. Here, churches should forget the so-called faith protection, where the recommended aspects are abstinence, the use of condom among couples and the idea of eternal punishment. So, let’s make sure holly words are not gendered, biased and misplaced, because we know that in some unemployed communities, beer and sex were or they are still like the only occupation or hobbies and condom use among married couples is then the “taboo” here, because it seems like most people get married after being sexually involved with their partners. Challenging!

Finally, we have to bear in mind that working only with women in their issues means excluding men and, this can take us to nowhere in terms of the impact of our actions. So, let men forget “machismo” and be involved in gender equality actions, as well enabling women to decide on their sexual and reproductive health. Even simple steps like promoting Male Circumcision - MC may be a way of involving men in the reduction of sexual transmitted diseases.

Moreover, in promoting social change, curricula have to include gender-sensitive elements that promote gender equality and classroom organization that enables girls and boys to learn in an equitable learning environment. Health programs should target schools and communities, with literacy and educative programs that enable women and men to shift their mind-sets about gender roles and reproductive health decision-making power. So, parents, leaders, teachers, health staff, social workers (including those working on psychosocial support - PSS) need to be trained to challenge gender stereotypes and sexual behaviours that undermine women agency in general.

This brainstorm could be endless. So, not only the strategically actions proposed here are useful, but also many others, contextually suitable, so long as they contribute in promoting gender
equality and women empowerment, meantime, building the bridge to (social) justice. Practical and real actions depend on what happens back in one’s community and, by saying that, we hope the examples we used here are not far from what happens back in your communities and countries.

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