This chapter starts with presenting a study carried out in Rwanda in 2010 on the prevailing perceptions of masculinity throughout the country that justify the use of violence against women. Some of the study’s findings are that social constructions of masculinities in Rwanda are associated with deep-rooted beliefs about the natural power of men over women; that the exposure to and involvement with violence during childhood, war, and genocide has a significant impact on the use of violence by adult men against their female partners; and that the recently implemented gender laws and policies and the campaigning for gender equality at all levels of society are not sufficient to effectively reduce gender-based violence. One of the study’s recommendations is that for a real change to take place, bottom-up strategies need to be developed and implemented with the involvement of men, women, boys, and girls from all strata of society. In the second part of the paper, we illustrate with examples the potential positive impact of such strategies. The examples are derived from research on the practice and impact of community-based psychosocial programs in Mozambique and Rwanda. The positive changes we identified are the result
of constructive interactions, debates, and experimenting with new behavior among participants of peer counseling groups in the safe social spaces that are being created over the course of the group sessions. We argue that community-based interventions, applying group educational approaches, may have a significant effect on the reduction of gender-based violence and the kind of masculinities that promote such violence. These interventions will be most effective when they are implemented in conjunction with government strategies that aim at the elimination of that violence.  

Introduction

Starting a few years before its independence on July 1, 1962, Rwanda has been experiencing a cycle of political violence that has affected both men and women. The wars of 1959, 1964, 1973, and 1990 to 1994 culminated in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Not only did the genocide claim millions of human lives but it also devastated the country leaving the social fabric in shambles. The postgenocide government was faced with a serious challenge of reconstructing the country both socially and materially. Rehabilitation of the country covered many different kinds of interventions including those that address the traumatic experiences of violence that millions of people were subjected to.

The socioeconomic take off was very difficult, but after the emergency phase, the Rwandan government with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) as ruling party put in place policies and other planning tools and mechanisms for effective implementation of development strategies. Progressively, the country, with the support from international partners, experienced positive development both socially and economically. The implementation of the National Gender Policy made it possible to include gender-related issues in the development process.

The constitutional framework provides quotas (at least 30 percent) for women in decision-making organs, which have resulted in an unprecedented number of women getting elected or appointed to decision-making positions at all levels of the Rwandan government. The progressive gender policies in Rwanda include the legalization