



# Political Violence as Moral Exclusion: Linking Peace Psychology to Feminist Critical Theory

by Mira Alexis P. Ofreneo  
Tesa C. de Vela

## **Abstract**

*Coming from peace psychology, this paper attempts to understand political violence by looking at its moral dimension as expressed through the social, psychological and cultural spheres. The result is a model that highlights moral exclusion as the social psychological basis for violence. By defining our scope of justice, violence towards excluded others is justified. Moral exclusion is supported by cultural norms that legitimise the use of violence and structural hierarchies that perpetuate violence. In search of an alternative, we turn to feminist critical theory. Our proposed peace agenda centers on Nancy Fraser's theory of recognition and redistribution, with questions directed to activists and social movements. The paper is discussed in the context of U.S. hegemony in today's world.*

### The Nature of Global Violence in Contemporary Societies

Violence has been studied across disciplines, each focusing on a specific system or unit of analysis: individual, group, institution/organisation, nation-states and politico-economic structures, and the transnational system (Joxe, 1981). At each level, disciplines have evolved a unique theory of causality, control, and intervention. There is no general theory that can explain violence in totality or that integrates the various disciplines of the social sciences. Instead, violence often is associated with social conflicts, social dysfunctions, or crises (Wieviorka, 2003).

The classical approach to examining violence is through levels. Pierre Hassner's three-way classification for instance includes (1) international systems; (2) the states; and (3) the societies within states (as cited in Wieviorka). Our own perspective is rooted in social psychology focusing on both individual and group violence. We maintain in this paper that the analysis of political violence, as depicted in Hassner's model, will benefit from a social psychological lens that sees the psychological and cultural dimensions of violence as linked to feminist critical theory.

If we define violence as actions that are detrimental to human life, health or well-being, then we must note that the contemporary growth of violence takes both structural and direct forms (Schiller & Fouron, 2003). The conceptual distinction between direct and structural violence is among peace research's major contributions to the study of violence (Galtung, 1981).

According to Galtung, the classical conception of violence is that of direct bodily destruction inflicted by an actor. Peace psychology defines **direct violence** as physical violence "that harms or kills people quickly, producing somatic trauma or total incapacitation" (Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001, p. 8). Though the discourse on global violence has long focused on interstate violence and the threat of nuclear war, direct violence varies in scale and complexity, from violence in personal relationships to large-scale violence such as genocide. Direct violence is often dramatic, personal, and episodic. The people who commit direct violent acts and the people who are victimised by these acts are identifiable (Opatow, 2001). Because direct violence is directly observable and the person/s responsible for it identifiable, it is often judged in terms of intentionality and morality. Religion, the law, and other ethical systems have often been used to judge episodes of direct violence and to determine sanctions if applicable (Christie, Wagner, & Winter).

Galtung points to another type of violence that is relatively permanent and is somehow built into the social structure – **structural violence**. Poverty, (the deprivation of basic material needs), repression (the deprivation of human rights), and alienation (the deprivation of higher needs) are the manifestations of structural violence (Galtung). This more subtle form of violence occurs globally and is almost invisible as it is normalised (Opatow). In structural violence, the persons responsible may not be clearly identifiable and the violence often commonplace, impersonal, continuous and thus, unnoticeable (Christie, Wagner, & Winter).



Structural violence occurs whenever societal structures and institutions produce **political oppression, economic exploitation, and social dominance**. It is “endemic to economic systems that produce a concentration of wealth for some while exploiting others, political systems that give access to some and oppress others, and hierarchical social systems that are suffused with ethnocentrism and intolerance. These conditions are static, stable, normalised, serve the interests of those who hold power and wealth, and are not self-correcting” (Christie, Wagner, & Winter, pp. 8-9). Structural violence is seldom viewed as immoral, but more often perceived as morally justified and therefore not necessitating punishment. But even if direct and structural violence are conceptually distinct, they often operate together to form a **system of violence**.

### **Political Violence as Moral Exclusion**

This paper attempts to understand political violence by looking at its moral dimension as expressed through the socio-psychological and cultural spheres. We look at the socio-psychological processes that allow violence to occur, the cultural norms that legitimise the use of violence, and the structural hierarchies that perpetuate violence. Though we recognise these three as interacting and simultaneously experienced levels of violence, i.e., the psychological, the cultural, and the structural, we focus on the first two. With the discourse on political violence dominated by structural analyses, we stress how violence involves the socio-psychological and cultural dimensions as well.

There are many ways to frame our understanding of political violence and ours will only be one of many. Our objective is simply to facilitate an appreciation of the socio-psychological and cultural processes that create and perpetuate political violence, an appreciation that shall be embedded in feminist critical theory.

A socio-psychological frame highlights the importance of subjective culture vis-à-vis material culture, of individual and collective consciousness vis-à-vis economic and political arrangements. Subjective culture refers to the social categories, norms, roles, and values in the human environment (Triandis, 1994). Triandis likens culture to a set of unstated assumptions on how things are done which are internalised and rarely questioned. To understand political violence, we need to look at the shared meanings of violence in a particular community, society, state, or interstate system. Similarly, though violence is explicable through a socio-psychological process possibly common to all peoples, it is always situated in a socio-cultural context.

Direct and structural violence occur only because it is legitimised or rationalised in the collective consciousness. How does violence become morally acceptable? This paper points to **moral exclusion** as the key social psychological process that justifies violence. Thus, we need to examine how social/political entities view themselves in relation to others in terms of the psychological processes of inclusion and exclusion. This then is supported by norms that justify violence in the larger socio-cultural realm. A socio-psychological framework does not discount the power of social structure to influence violence

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**Moral Exclusion: The Social Psychological Basis for Violence**

At the peak of the post-September 11 attacks, U.S. President Bush declared that he would “make no distinction between the terrorists and those who harbour them.” Bush’s “you are either with us or against us” rhetoric was his resounding slogan upon the declaration of the U.S. war against Iraq, promoted as the “war against terrorism” (Chossudovsky, 2002).

but includes the power of psychological and cultural processes in the analysis of violence.

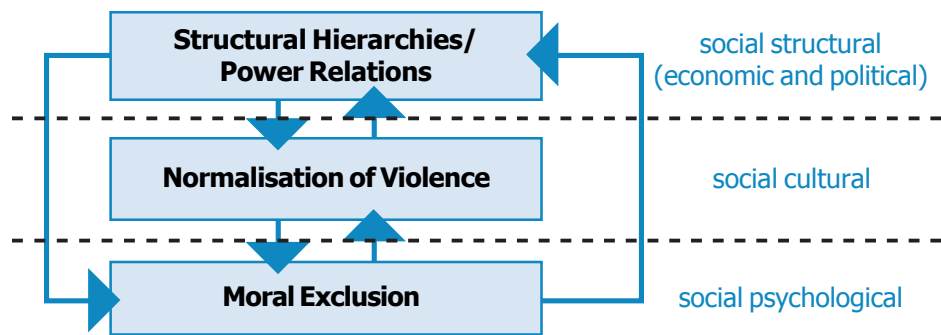
**A Multidimensional Model: Towards Understanding Political Violence**

Our framework for understanding political violence situates it as co-created by the social psychological process of moral exclusion, by cultural norms that justify violence, and by economic and political hierarchies of power that maintain it (see Figure 1). The psychological, cultural, and structural may be conceptually analysed independent of one another. However, we assert that these dimensions are in essence interrelated.

Openly, U.S. President Bush made use of moral exclusion and continues to do so on a global level. We saw how the Bush administration, with the U.S. media as its mouthpiece, prepared the world for the ruthless and uncompromising killings and destruction in Afghanistan and elsewhere (Chossudovsky).

The concept of moral exclusion allows us to understand both the rationale and social acceptance of such acts of political violence. **Moral exclusion** is described as “the process whereby individuals or groups are perceived to be outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply” (Opotow, 1990, as cited in Tyler & Smith, 1998, p. 615). According to Susan Opotow, moral exclusion serves as the moral justification

*Figure 1. A Multidimensional Model of Political Violence*



and rationalisation for both structural and direct violence. This means that inflicting violence upon “others” outside one’s scope of justice is justified.

The U.S. war against Iraq is an example of how a state found it morally justified to engage in open war with another state, despite international sentiments against such a war. On the other hand, the September 11 attacks also exemplify how a “terrorist” group found it morally justifiable to kill hundreds of innocent civilians in pursuit of its own political objective.

“Gender, ethnicity, religious identity, age, mental capacity, sexual orientation, and political affiliation are some criteria used to define moral exclusion” (Opotow, p. 103). That the African-Americans have historically been excluded from equality in the distribution of social resources (Cook, 1990) is an example.

political entity’s scope of justice. Why does one state find it just to declare open war upon another state? Why are prisoners of war tortured or abused? Our morals apply to those inside our “moral community” or scope of justice (Deutsch, 1974, 1985, and Opotow, 1990, and Staub, 1989, as cited in Opotow). **Morals** as used in this sense are the “norms, rights, entitlements, obligations, responsibilities, and duties that shape our sense of justice and guide our behavior with others” (Deutsch, 1985, as cited in Opotow, p. 103).

Moral exclusion is characterised by viewing the excluded ‘others’ as psychologically distant and as nonentities undeserving of fairness or resources. Hence, there is a lack of moral obligation or responsibility toward them (Opotow). Excluded ‘others’ can be viewed as non-persons on whom oppression, exploitation, and dominance become normal and acceptable. As such, moral exclusion fosters direct and structural violence.

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People, be it the state or social movements, define their **scope of justice**. We set the boundaries between the individuals and groups whose well-being we take care of and those we do not. In terms of social or political groups, we define the collective to whom we feel morally obligated. Whose needs, views, and welfare are valued and whose are not, depends on a particular

### Cultural Meanings of Violence: Morality and Normality

Moral exclusion and “us-them” thinking are the psychological processes that rationalise violence in the collective mind. The psyche, however, is always contingent upon culture (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). Culture can be conceptualised as public, shared meanings—a worldview which includes cognitive and affective beliefs about social reality (Ross, 2000). As Triandis asserts, “culture imposes a set of lens for seeing the world” (p. 13). The dynamic mutual constitution of culture and psyche is a fundamental assumption of our framework. People

incorporate cultural models, meanings and practices into their psychological processes. These psychological processes, in turn, effect change or maintain the cultural system (Fiske, et al.).

**Morality.** In relation to our concept of morality and our scope of justice, all cultural systems incorporate meanings of what is good and moral (Fiske, et al.). Kitayama and Markus (1994) outline the core ideas in every culture as that (1) which is good, (2) which is moral, and (3) which is self (as cited in Fiske, et al.). From their model, these core cultural ideas, together with ecological, economic, and political factors comprise collective reality. Core cultural ideas are then reflected in the different elements of culture: customs, norms, practices, and institutions. For instance, we learn about our society's shared meaning of what is good through the state, the legal system, the educational system, and socialisation practices.

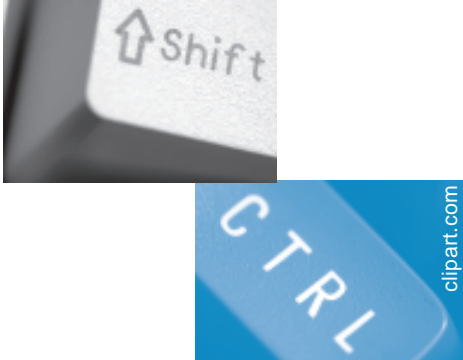
“Within a society, much if not most social behaviour is constructed, fostered, and sanctioned with reference to the community's conception of the good” (Fiske, et al.). When is a particular type of violence allowed? Which forms of violence are socially constructed as good? In what specific situations or contexts is a particular type of violence interpreted as moral? As we conceptualise morality in the larger context, do states and the transnational system see globalisation and war as just? Do we find ourselves in the midst of a global hegemonic culture of violence?

The moral systems of justice and caring are examples of how cultural conceptions of morality can promote or contest structural or direct violence. The Western moral tradition of **justice** is founded on the concept of personal

freedom and individual rights (Fiske, et al.). Its assumption is that society serves individual needs and desires which may compete with that of others. Thus, individuals enter into a social contract, agreeing to abide by a set of abstract principles to maintain the social order. In this tradition, behavior is judged on whether it violates individual “rights.” Because of this individualistic focus, advancing the “rights” of others or helping others is not a moral requirement (Eisenberg, et al., 1986, and Nunner-Winkler, 1984, as cited in Fiske, et al.).

In contrast, a morality of **caring** sees the community or group as central. An example here is Carol Gilligan's (1982) “care” perspective which views morality in terms of understanding human relationships and maintaining one's individual freedom without neglecting one's responsibility to others (as cited in Fiske, et al.). Miller and Bersoff (1992, 1994) look at interdependent cultural contexts where a concern with one's own needs and rights are secondary to interpersonal obligation (as cited in Fiske, et al.). Caring, in this sense, becomes a moral imperative.

**Normality.** As we have argued previously, our subjective conceptions of which and when specific forms of violence are morally justified, even valued as morally good, are co-determined by culture. We further theorize that violence through subjective interpretations, not only becomes *moral* but also *normal*. Violence, in this case, becomes normative—accepted as just the way things are. **Norms** are “ideas about what is correct behavior for members of a particular group” (Triandis, p. 98). Norms prescribe what is accepted, expected, and “proper” for people to do (Myers, 2002). They may



be reflected in a cultural group or society's traditions or established in the laws of the state (Triandis).

The power of a cultural norm is derived from its acceptance by members of a specific culture (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, and Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991, as cited in Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Norms are internalised by group members through direct or vicarious reinforcement, and laws are then developed to support social norms. Norms may be transmitted deliberately through active teaching or instruction, demonstrations, and other rituals. Or they may be learned through observation and imitation (Allison, 1992, and Lumsden, 1988, as cited in Cialdini & Trost). Norms persist both because of their value to group members and their adaptive function—primarily the need for social control and collective survival (Campbell, 1975, and Triandis, 1994, as cited in Cialdini & Trost).

As peace psychologists recognise, cultural norms provide the necessary backdrop for the occurrence of violence (Wagner, 2001). A specific example is how nations that engage in intensely violent activity send a message to their people regarding the instrumental value of violence, i.e., legitimising war (Geen, 1998). As Archer and Gartner (1984) found, countries that participated in World Wars I and II experienced an increase in postwar violence (as cited in Geen). When violence becomes accepted as a moral and normal part of a people's way of life, it ceases to be a social concern. Violence then is not only tolerated, it can even be honoured as a cultural virtue.

Violence may therefore become embedded in social norms that prescribe the conditions under which aggression

is an acceptable and even socially desirable behavior (Geen). Thus, we speak of cultures and subcultures of violence. This does not mean that a culture openly promotes violence or aggression but it defines the conditions wherein such behaviour becomes acceptable. When violence has become a norm, its practice is left unquestioned. As such, the cultural acceptance of violence supports the social psychological process of moral exclusion.

### **Structural Hierarchies and Power Relations: Perpetuating Cultures of Violence**

This paper will not dwell on political violence in the dimension of structural hierarchies given that this is the dimension that dominates much of the existing discourse on violence. We nevertheless provide a brief discussion and highlight aspects of structural hierarchies for a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional model of moral exclusion.

Both the socio-psychological and the cultural dimensions interact with economic and political arrangements to complete our picture of political violence. Like Montiel (2003), we take the position that economics, politics, and culture are equally important and interact with one another in a bi-directional manner. Social structure refers to patterns of relatively permanent hierarchical relations among groups in a social system (Parsons, 1961, as cited in Montiel, 2001). To examine social structures means to look at social power differentials between groups wherein certain groups have more wealth and power than others (Galtung, 1978, as cited in Montiel, 2001).



The world order is embedded with power imbalances borne by societies that privilege those with more wealth over those with less. But perhaps the more fundamental point is that power imbalances, including the existing and largely unquestioned structural hierarchies of societies today, are embedded in violence, both in means and outcomes. Paradoxically, it is this culture of violence, through moral exclusion, that is fostered to maintain the so-called world order.

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### Towards a Morality of Recognition: *Countering Cultures of Violence*

Moral exclusion limits our scope of justice to a select few and allows us to accept violence, both in its direct and structural forms. The challenge is how to promote moral inclusion or the process of transcending our natural tendency to categorise, to identify ourselves exclusively with our ingroups, and to include *only* our ingroups within this scope of justice.

This paper draws on the critical theory of recognition in its attempt to re-envision an alternative to the existing world order. In search for a remedy to moral exclusion, we adopt Nancy Fraser's concept of **recognition** originally developed in reference to struggles for "recognition of difference" of identity-based social

movements, e.g., by nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality (Fraser, 1997, 2002). Other approaches such as the ethic of care (Gilligan), and moral inclusion (Opatow) can be associated with recognition through the same spirit of according respect to all groups, societies, and peoples.

However, we choose to emphasise Fraser's theory of recognition for it offers concrete and real alternatives. We find her conceptualisation of recognition most appropriate in building the agenda for a new moral order, firstly because Fraser's formulation was originally developed to curb "cultural injustice" or "misrecognition" (i.e., cultural domination), and secondly because of its integration of the socio-economic structural realm to the realm of the symbolic and the cultural. Fraser terms the former as the politics of redistribution and the latter as the politics of recognition. She further asserts that it is necessary to address both realms if a truly transformative vision of social justice is to be achieved. Thus a fair and just distribution of material wealth cannot be the sole gauge of the moral quality of social relations. Of equal importance is our recognition of one another.

Conceptually, recognition is referred to as a remedy to culturally ingrained sources of injustices, or what Fraser terms as "some sort of cultural or symbolic change...upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups." (Fraser, 1997, p. 15). Cultural domination is cited as an example of where the social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication of one culture is imposed on another. Such imposition can alienate, antagonise and generally disrespect the subordinated culture (Fraser, 1997, 2002).



Thus recognition as a remedy entails affirming cultural diversity. It can entail a total transformation of the social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication towards a total transformation of one's sense of other and self. Generally it refers to an undoing of the cultural practices of domination, disrespect and non-recognition that remains pervasive in contemporary societies.

Such cultural practices have resulted in both direct and structural forms of violence. Ironically the justifications for such violence surface in the realm of morality. For instance, the declaration of war, perhaps the ultimate form of domination, is often packaged as a moral duty and obligation to one's country or belief.

Nevertheless, we maintain that the relation between morality and recognition is most explicit in the moral

Fraser further proposes the treatment of recognition as an issue of **social status** rather than social identity. Non-recognition is more than the refusal to acknowledge identities. Rather it refers to the social subordination that prevents **participation as a peer** or **parity of participation**. Thus the goal is to replace cultural values and practices that hinder parity of participation with values and practices that cultivate equal social status or equality in participation.

In the larger context of war and globalisation, the challenge is how to broaden the range of people whose well-being we will care for. This framework is particularly geared towards challenging the way in which the social world order, where the U.S. is the prime player, has practised and promoted "marketability" rather than "caring" (Pilisuk, 2001); or comparative advantage rather than parity of participation and as such provides the breeding ground for a culture of violence. We need to recognise that globalisation thrives on exclusion, inequality and violence, be it in the level of the economic and political, cultural or psychological.

We propose that the broadening of one's scope of justice begins with creating a **morality of recognition** based on social status. If moral exclusion is to be addressed at the level of individual psychology, in essence the agenda is for a re-engineering of individual consciousness. Though more complex, such re-engineering of consciousness can also be constructed at the level of social movements.

It is in fact the level of social movements that this framework paper primarily addresses. To begin the re-engineering of social movement

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injury caused by misrecognition and/or denied recognition. Whether this moral injury manifests in terrorists' attacks or in the all out and ongoing war against terrorism, such a moral order reflects the total disregard and disrespect for the other and the narrowing, rather than broadening of one's scope of justice. What Fraser proposes therefore is a conceptual expansion of our paradigm of justice translated in construing "recognition as a matter of justice" (Fraser, 2002, p. 38).

consciousness we propose that the following questions be asked:

- How do you perceive your group's representation of ideas vis-à-vis the other groups? For instance, do you view your group as being the more legitimate, the more radical and uncompromising? Or do you view your group as different but of equal moral position as the other groups?
- How can you transform categories of other groups that create hierarchies, inequalities and domination? For instance, can you create new categories of other groups based on neutral descriptions rather than based on judgments of their positions and actions?
- How can you transform your group's strategies that may be undermining, obliterating, and/or demonising other groups adversarial to your representation of ideas? For instance, can you promote strategies designed to respect different and differing representations of ideas by other groups and explore points of convergences?
- How can your group sustain a position of being respectful and open to differences of ideas and avoid falling into the trap of moral exclusion? For instance, can you develop principles, philosophies, frameworks and policies that promote inclusiveness in view, approach and practice?
- How do you perceive the use of violent methods for pursuing political struggles? For instance, can you cite specific incidents when violent methods are morally acceptable for you or do you

unwaveringly see violent methods as ineffective in promoting peace and therefore immoral?

Returning to our case in point, U.S. hegemony, terrorism and counterterrorism are concrete examples of how moral exclusion is exemplified. Both terrorist and counterterrorist positions claim to be the more righteous and legitimate in their use of violent methods. Both terrorist and counterterrorist positions have excluded the other from their scope of justice. What remains essential in ending the global culture of violence and promoting a global culture of peace are not further demarcations of U.S. versus Iraq, George Bush versus Bin Laden, nor democracy versus fundamentalism.

Rather, it is the openness to genuinely understand the positions and actions of both terrorist and counterterrorist groups, directed at upwardly revaluing and respecting their different political, religious, and cultural contexts and rationalisations. This would include a total transformation of the way in which global media, for instance, have and continue to represent, interpret and communicate to the public at large the terrorist and counterterrorist stance. Rather than engineer the public's consciousness into finding justification for the acts of political violence, media should instead serve to educate and positively endorse cultural diversity and not cultural hegemony.

Yet, even social movements and those seeking social justice need to recognise that changing violent structures requires recognising those "perpetuating" or "committing" injustice as part of their scope of justice. That to exclude them is to continue perpetuating a culture of violence.



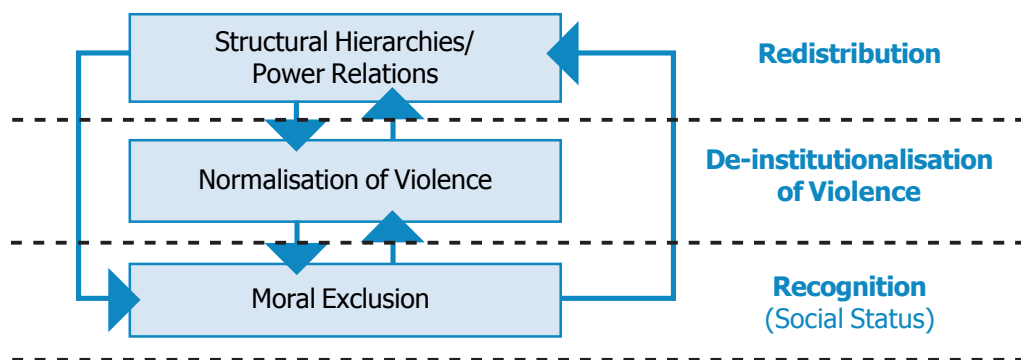
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As our sense of morality can expand to include everyone, the boundaries between “we” and “they,” between “us” and “them,” can disappear. The hope for a just and fair world can lie in promoting a morality of recognition in the future generations. In Figure 2, we diagram a possible peace agenda that seeks change in the psychological, cultural, and structural levels. From the pockets of resistance to the global hegemonic culture of violence, we can begin strategising on how to encourage moral recognition, how to change cultural values and norms to promote peace, and how to transform structures

towards nonhierarchical and equitable relations. This may be unrealistic—like dreaming of utopia—but in a strange and surreal way, we have to teach the world to care.

We must keep in mind that morals are not givens. Conceptions of morality are not fixed. They may seem permanent as traditions, values, beliefs, and norms endure for many generations. But they are nevertheless constructions of social groups. We believe in the capacity of human agency to instill social change, whether at the level of the psychological, the cultural, or the structural. ♪

**Figure 2.** A Multidimensional Model of a Possible Peace Agenda



**Mira Elexis P. Ofreneo** teaches at the Ateneo de Manila University where she also earned her Ph.D. in Social Psychology. She is the current female representative for Asia to the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and head of Can't Live in the Closet (CLIC) Philippines.

**Tesa C. de Vela** has a Master of Arts degree in Women and Development from the University of the Philippines in Diliman, and is currently the Associate Director of Isis International-Manila. She teaches Gender and Society at the International Studies Department at Miriam College Philippines.

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