

#### **14. Racist discrimination on the rise -- the reality**

*Carmel Guerra, Director of the [Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues](#), writes:*

Complaints of religious discrimination have doubled in the past year from 51 complaints in 2003/04 to 106 complaints in 2004/05. This new information released by the Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria signifies that the introduction of laws and the debate around terrorism and ethnicity is having an effect on a large number of Victorians.

Our extensive work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) young people backs up this information. We have found that recently they are feeling increasingly targeted and fearful that the wider community doesn't understand them. For example, young women from the northern suburbs of Melbourne are scared to travel into the city. The short trip from Preston, Coburg or Brunswick is one they won't do alone.

Multiculturalism has always represented a good news story in Australia; a point of harmony, celebration and understanding. Rather than creating a "melting pot," multiculturalism acknowledges the strength and richness of diversity and allows people to take pride in who they are.

Wearing a hijab, for example, should not be seen as a point of dissension. It's about a woman having the freedom to choose to wear a headscarf, just as a man may choose to wear a crucifix or a yarmulke as a legitimate form of religious expression.

With discussions in the media and comments by some politicians referring to a proscribed notion of "Australian values," it is important we engage in this debate and ask – what are "Australian values"? And who are the "We" that is being alluded to? Constructing myths about a homogeneous Australian identity has the effect of marginalising some of the most vulnerable groups in our community.

Reported attacks against Muslim women in particular is a tragic consequence of a debate that is not adequately embracing the concepts of multiculturalism that have been celebrated in Australia for so long.

The tragedy of the current debate is that it further diminishes people's ability to feel proud of their background and identity. Pushing young people and CLD communities further to the margins, as recent debate and policy has tended to do, will only reduce their capacity (and willingness) to apply their resilience, strength and resourcefulness to the economic and social well-being of the country.