

## **On Gendered Violence and Policing: An Interview** *Carrie Low and Maggie Rahr*

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Martha Paynter (MP): Maggie is a freelance journalist here in Halifax who has developed a real expertise and is known for her reporting on sexual violence and it's really traumatic what Maggie regularly immerses themselves in. And Carrie, who we've introduced a couple of times but we're going to do it again, is an accomplished and acclaimed trauma-informed sexual assault advocate for survivors' rights in the criminal justice system in Nova Scotia. Founder and current peer facilitator of Survivors for Change and Empowerment and has been hosting this group since October 2020. She's currently working towards a BA at Dalhousie and she's working with us and with the E Fry Society. Now Carrie and Maggie have for two years, just over two years now, working on Carrie Low Versus, their really amazing CBC podcast that has six episodes. The most recent which was released hours ago really, and it tells the story of Carrie's experiences with the Halifax Regional Police and their response to sexual assault. So, we are getting a live piece of this two-year project that they worked on together, it's really amazing, and I'm so grateful that you both agreed to do this. So without further ado, Carrie and Maggie.

Maggie Rahr (MR): Thank you for having us, thanks for having me, it's a privilege to be here, especially with Carrie. We were just joking that this funny cause usually when we talk it's just the two of us in my kitchen or whatever. So, we're having this conversation in front of everyone, which it's really nice to be here, but it definitely feels a little bit different. Anyway, so I'm going to interview Carrie, which we've done many, many times over the last two and a half years but this is a little bit different. So just to start, Carrie I was thinking we could start in the present and you could tell us a little bit more about the list that Martha just shared about the works that you're up to and then you could begin with your group and how you could tell us how that all came together, like how you started this group.

Carrie Low (CL): The first launch of the group was October 2020 and through my experiences I was finding it very hard to navigate going through

what I was going through and trying to find supports other than, and yes, I have a therapist and yes, I have a legal team, and yes, I have immediate family. I felt, as much as all of those are very important and supportive of me, I felt I was still lacking something, and I always still felt alone. I felt alone through the whole process. So, with the work that I've been doing with the Elizabeth Fry Society, between Emma and I we decided that we should, that I should start a peer support group. We started the discussion in August and then in October, I launched the first meeting and since then I've been holding a monthly peer support group. Now, we're working towards more workshops where we're going to have guest speakers come in. We had a tremendous turnout actually in August where we had Dee Dooley of the Avalon Centre, she came in and talked about trauma and the brain. So really giving survivors of sexualized violence a space to come talk about our experiences, collaborate with each other, share the knowledge that we have gathered through our processes. What organizations can we lean on for support or someone else has contacts somewhere. But then also to try and learn about our trauma and how it's affecting us, physically, mentally, financially, and just building in that work together. So, that's what I've been doing with that.

MR: And we're going to come back to that after and talk more about the work that Carrie is achieving and what her goals are but just to kind of lean back in time, so the incident really that brought us together as like human and, well also human but reporter, human reporter yah. Anyway, yah I'm laughing but really it's a horrific attack Carrie that you endured and I think that most members of the public, citizens who don't work in the sectors that are associated with wellness within for instance would imagine that if you were kidnapped and drugged and gang-raped that you bring this to the police and that they will respond and that action will be taken. Outside of our beliefs about the carceral system or whether that works or not, that this is something that will lead to safety. So, is that your, was that your view, I mean at this horrific time when this incident took place? Maybe you can bring us back to that decision to go to police and to share your story with them.

CL: I think for me, you know looking back at that moment when I made that decision, was I had experienced a rape in my very early twenties and I didn't report it, I kept quiet about it. We're all brought up in a society where

you don't talk about things, you know? You're shamed. I didn't do that. And fast forward to twenty years later when this happened to me, I had no question that I had to report because I have three daughters and that night there was actually a young girl at that bar that actually used to come sleep over at my house when she was a teenager. And I think it was just sort of all of those things combined with like, you know I need to teach my daughters that if something happens, you go to police, you report cause that's what "you're supposed to do". They're supposed to help you and I remember that drive that morning from the soccer game was 'do I go to the police?, do I go to the hospital?, do I go to the police?' and I was like I cannot go to the police station and do this right now and you know, although I do joke about it now, but one of the things I learned and where I learned it from was CSI. You go to the hospital; you get a rape kit done. So that's where I went. And that was when I made the decision to report that this happened to me, and if it's happened to me, it's happening to others and I wanted to report because I thought, it was a serious event, to me it was a serious crime, it would be a priority and that they would investigate. So that was why I did it.

MR: Right and so actually during the collection of that rape kit, the sexual assault nurse examiner, one of them actually stepped in to interrupt that first exchange that you were having with a police officer who just happened to be at the hospital that morning. Do you feel comfortable telling us about that interaction? I think people might find that illuminating.

CL: You know in the moment I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know if the police officer was doing the right thing and asking the right questions.

MR: Yah, you were in shock.

CL: I'm in shock, I don't know, my 16-year-old daughter is with me, that was traumatic enough that like was I doing the right thing by having my daughter there, but as a single mom it's like she's been my rock my whole life, and there she was and it's a police officer and I being the 'quiet little' you know 'yes sir, this is what happened'. And then when she pulled the curtain back and she was like stop, you don't do this, you don't interview her here, I didn't. That again was another shock to me because I didn't

see the red flags right away and what was happening. Then they had their altercation and then it was like “well, this is our policy, and this is what we do” and they had their moment and that was traumatic itself and hopefully maybe everyone can learn from that as well. But where I’m at now, if she didn’t do that, like I’m glad she did that, that she advocated for me. She was protecting me. I was her patient in her care at the time and this officer was not trauma-informed and was not doing his job correctly. And then the second piece to that was SANE does call you within 48 hours, to check-in on you, how are you doing, and I think that call lit the fire in me to advocate for myself going forward because I told her you know “they didn’t come get my clothes. They’re still sitting in this plastic bag”, and she was like “oh my goodness they need to come get the clothes”, because if there was a condom used, or there was you know there are things that may not come out in this rape kit that the clothing need to be tested. So she said to me, “you need to push them” and that’s what started my push.

MR: Right, this was one of the first errors, was that the police officer who happened to be responding in the Dartmouth General ER, sent Carrie home with a bag to place the evidence in, including the clothing that she was wearing which of course we know is an error and can compromise the quality of potential evidence should this reach a criminal court. So one more thing I wanted to mention before we move on to the next stage, a flaw was that you know we later learned that there was an exchange that follow-up at the end of that nurse’s shift. They actually wrote their boss and said, describing their discomfort with this interaction that had taken place, and this police officer’s response, and in the letter the same coordinator says look like can we meet up face-to-face and talk about this with a supervisor in the police department and it’s unclear whether that ever happened, but the response was definitely defensive and saying you know it was the nurses who were out of line and that this cop did their job and whatever.

CL: And they also lied, they also lied and said that they comforted me, and I felt they did everything right and that I had nothing but praise for this police officer and he was amazing. I did not.

MR: So meanwhile, you’re waiting to hear back from the police for them to come gather this evidence that you have in your possession, and this is

sort of the beginning of a string of failures and I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about what that was like? Because I imagine you're still in the immediate aftermath of this nightmare, that there's no you know right way to respond to but certainly we know that this is a life-changing attack and here when you shared your notes with me, I should really give Carrie a shout-out here because she kept these extraordinarily meticulous records of every point of contact with police, including military time. So, you know I've never had that in any other story I've covered with lawyers or whatever, nobody and so it's like whoa okay, you know the name of every person she spoke with, who if she got transferred from one person to someone else. So that was an extraordinary tool for me in terms of a reporter to be able to tell your story and to be able to go back and confirm some of these details. But the thing I'm hoping you can talk about is this push that really began for you to get information to make contact with various officers, there were so many points of following up, and I'm wondering if you can describe what that was like, and what, if any, information you were getting at that stage?

CL: Well, I received no information for the longest time, and what that was like for me, I don't try to go back to remember a lot of the moments throughout this because they are very traumatic and, but I felt like in those first, until Emma Halpern came involved so up until this point, for three months I was doing this on my own. So, I had three months that I was like doing this on my own and everything in it just felt like, you know and I think you touched on it in your podcast where it's like when you have trauma you just sort of hold on to the things that you would normally do to get through it. So, for me, these notes I spent over twenty years in the transportation industry. At that time, I was an operations manager, so we're taught, you know for twenty-seven years was who did you talk to, when did you talk to them? You always had to like, cause when I started there wasn't a lot of emails, a lot of things was done on paper, and you always had to cover your ass, and one thing I learned, one boss at one point from years earlier, said take notes and when you leave your desk someone can sit, like if you call in sick, someone else can sit at your desk and know exactly what's going on. So that has been my life right for twenty years, and the military time, you can't tell a truck driver he has a pickup at 6:00 because is that six in the morning or six at night? So, you know my life has been in military time

for twenty some years as well, so. But it was more like an autopilot for me, it was just, it was, you know I didn't understand again I've always been watching crime documentaries and CSI, so it just didn't make sense to me like why they weren't picking up the clothes and then telling me that well oh now we believe that you were at that trailer, so we don't need to go collect evidence. We believe you, and like I wasn't able to connect the dots because I was literally still in that trauma until I was able to have Emma on my team and talk to a lawyer and what not. So really it was just like autopilot and me just trying to push you know for answers. And the other part was, which was interesting, is you know when you're a victim of a crime you are assigned a Victims Services worker and she was sort of the one to help navigate me through it because she didn't understand. So, what should happen is you call your, and this is why you know?

MR: It is assigned through the courts, it's at an arms-length.

CL: Right and I think they were starting to get pissed off at me because I was calling them almost on the daily but because the rule is I call my Victims Services worker who can you know look up on my case file and she can give me updates. The police never once put an update on my file. Not one time for six months, nothing. So, she couldn't answer, she couldn't give me any information, so I had to call police.

MR: Which is crazy from like a context perspective, any investigation even if they aren't doing a bang-up job or whatever, every call, every person they can talk to, every piece of information that's logged is supposed to be in the system, so that there's, like the...

CL: So that there's a relay of information to...

MR: Right and so that they have a log of your own internal system so even that was completely shocking that there was nothing in there, like literally zero. So I want to just leap ahead a little bit, and again I definitely don't want, have you re-telling those details that we've already revisited so many times together, but at the point at which we met, it had been a year, or that was the first contact, we didn't meet until a couple of months later.

CL: Right.

MR: There were no arrests, there had been no results from the evidence, meaning like DNA, there were issues with the toxicology report, and you were having a very difficult time gaining and accessing any kind of information about any updates or direction. You in fact were the person who was pushing this forward. So, this is going to sound very suspicious of me, I'm not trying to like you know pat myself on the back here, but just knowing, as I'm sure everyone in this room does, how poorly these cases are often handled and covered in the media, I can't, I'm just trying to imagine the moment that you decided well I guess I'll talk to a reporter? Like that must have been terrifying and you must have felt like you didn't have any other options.

CL: I didn't have any other options. So, when I met Emma, she was the first person to validate there's something wrong here. Because for three months, like I try and go through this trauma, trying to heal, trying to and then thinking I was crazy, like this is crazy, I'm calling the police and nothing is happening, maybe this is not happening, we're done. I literally felt I was going crazy. So, to meet with Emma and have her say no, she validated, this is bizarre, why is this happening? And then I also had Andrea McNiven who came on board as well and she sort of started to do a communication so I could be extracted from that process and she started communicating and again, even having a lawyer trying to communicate to get information you know nothing, nothing, nothing. And so collectively the three of us decided that we should now contact the media.

MR: Right and this was also the timing paired with your first legal action reaching a court room.

CL: That's right.

MR: And we don't have to sort of dwell too much on this timeline but there are many stages of shocking and like truly unbelievable developments that took place over even the course of you and I knowing each other and me trying to you know cover this story as a journalist, like it's in podcast if

anybody is interested, it's out there, it's called *Carrie Low Versus*, featuring our heroine here, but I'm wondering if we can just sort of leap forward in time and if you can now describe, based on your intense and three-year long engagement with the police, three and a half years, and not just with individuals but as the system as a whole. This is going to sound really obvious and maybe kind of flat, but I'm wondering like what you learned about the way that police respond to cases like yours, understanding that you can only really speak about your own experience? That you didn't know going in, and what you would want people to know?

CL: So what I have learned in my experience and mine is very unique in a sense because I did have an officer come forward and acknowledge what was happening. In my experience, police don't believe women and police do not respond to sexualized violence against women, adult women. They don't investigate, they tell women it's a he said/she said, there's no point in going through this, they do many attempts to discourage us from continuing the process. You know a lot of, any time you want to stop, we can stop, you don't have to go through with this. And I think that's part of you know the misogyny that goes on in there and the patriarchal system of we just really don't want to deal with women, and we really don't want to deal with sexualized violence. And then the responses I was getting when I was giving the push-back, really didn't you know make any sense to me. I mean, I was repeatedly told, and I have it in writing from RCMP and HRP, that my case was not a priority. And to this day, I don't understand that. They put, again I understand children are a priority, vulnerable people are a priority but adult women, sexualized violence is not a priority in their system. But I was kidnapped, I was drugged, and I was gang-raped, and they didn't think that was a priority and sorry this part gets a little tough for me. You know because it's, what I reported, the first thing I thought about was like that Monday morning there was going to be a news report you know that this happened at a bar and women be safe, and you know, and it never happened. So, and then I guess what I've learned through the process, having my Victims Services at one point, she even told me I could make a complaint but said don't bother because the police will then stop investigating, even though they weren't investigating.

MR: You mean as a retaliation because you...



CL: Well because, I was like why are they not, you know why are there no updates, what's going on? And she was like well you can make a police complaint, but I will tell you as your Victims Services worker, historically when people make complaints against police, they will start treating you different and they will stop investigating.

MR: So, if you're comfortable, let's leap forward in time to the arrest, which was the beginning of your engagement with the legal system. A friend recently, I kept saying the justice system and she kept correcting me, stop saying that, it's the legal system. It's actually kind of jarring as a journalist who covers these kinds of things regularly to not make that distinction in language but that was a helpful correction. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about your, yah the beginning of that process with the legal system and with the Crown because it seems like it kind of echoes what happened in the beginning with police? Meaning that you had an idea about how this would unfold and what the result would be, and your experience turned out to be very different.

CL: Right. So, the arrest, I can tell you how the person was arrested. So, the only reason the person was arrested is because there was a DNA match from the clothing. And the clothing of course they didn't take for ten days, and they didn't even send for processing for almost two years. No sorry almost a year after the first, right. So finally, and it was me pushing for the clothes, you know have you sent the clothes for testing, no we haven't, dah, dah, dah. And then when they, I remember when they called me, it was actually my father's birthday, and when they called to say that they arrested this man and he was never one of the named, people of interest that they had shared with me, so I was like how is this possible? And cause these people were strangers to me, and they said well there was a DNA match on this clothing and the first thing I thought about was he's never going to be found guilty because any defense lawyer is going to be the girl had the clothes for ten days, you know can't use that as evidence. I mean that was the first thought that went through my mind. So for me, it was, fast-forward even to now, is knowing that, and we just talked about this outside, is knowing that when police don't, even if they didn't believe me, so what, whatever? But it's criminal investigation 101, I like the way that was worded in the podcast, it's like you know the police are there to investigate and collect as much evidence as possible. And I think this

is where one of the huge problems is on where we have such a low conviction rate is because police aren't investigating, they're not collecting evidence. You know they're failing to send toxicology reports in time, failing to take clothes, and then it's now not admissible. So then when it comes time to you know the criminal trial, then it's a he said/she said right? There's no evidence because police didn't collect all of that. So that's where I find there's a huge problem. But now I feel, what was the question?

MR: There's a really great excerpt in the podcast where you're describing going to meet with the Crown and what you say is that you know, like you understand intellectually that this is not the police, but that working with the Crown to you felt like an extension of that experience.

CL: Almost sometimes worse.

MR: And can you talk about that?

CL: Yah I can. So you know with the police, yah they did what they did but especially in the initial stages and then I mean now I'm on my third investigator who doesn't talk to me, but you know they portray that they're working for me and that they believe me and that they're on my side and that it's a priority and they're doing these things. So they're very good at acting. When it comes to the Crown, they basically treated me like shit, that I'm just a witness to my crime, that they don't work for me, basically any time I met with them it was just, like it was robotic. There's no humanity, there's no empathy, there's no compassion. And I'll talk more about the case again and how shitty that was and how they treated me in that sense. So when it comes to the legal system and how the Crown treated me, I felt was actually worse because they could have at least pretended like they cared and they didn't right? So that's the difference.

MR: And there were similar experiences that you described meaning that you would reach out for updates and try to understand their process and if there was anything to kind of share and report back, and that that was, seems like a very tense relationship. Did that surprise you that there wasn't as much willingness on their part to share information or kind of update you? Almost at times it sounded like it was adversarial. I mean you know

maybe we should just leap ahead and talk about the publication bit, which so there was a publication ban, yah in Carrie's case and you were never informed about it.

CL: Right.

MR: So, what was that like?

CL: So I was really fucking pissed off because you know, and they all knew, anyone around here knows, I've been very public with my story since 2019, the Crown knew that. You know, in July Emma Halpern and I sat in their office, and we told them that we were working on a podcast with Maggie and CBC, you know, and we wanted to be transparent with them, that this is what we were doing, we told them when it was going to launch. And if they had any questions. So of course, they were like oh my god you're going to talk about you know, and I said don't worry, I'm not going to talk about that night, that night will be in the podcast, but it was pre-recorded in 2019 before this person was ever arrested. Anything that we talk about going forward is just going to be my experience through these systems. And they were like oh o.k., alright, whatever, and then September 1, when you called me to tell me that there was this publication ban and they sent a letter which specifically said we know Maggie Barr is doing a podcast on Carrie Low, by the way there's a publication ban, you can't do this. They never told me in that meeting.

MR: Or at any other time.

CL: Never.

MR: And the points at which you were threatened with being charged for violating that publication ban.

CL: Yes, multiple times I was threatened, they had to do their talk, well it's this process and by the way if you talk about it, we're going to charge you. I told her she was sneaky, I told her she was very sneaky.

MR: Which is the epitome of Carrie Low being like really aggressive. Like whoa.

CL: Well, I mean because I'm trying not to use my trucking language. Anyway, but I called her, I remember I was, I feel like that was the first time I really lashed out and was like, I was yelling on the phone, and I was like you know you have the power to put this on, take it off. And you know hat, and I said, I sat in your office, and I was transparent with you and what the fuck, I didn't say that but I'm like you know what?

MR: But you thought it.

CL: But you're just sneaky. Anyway yah.

MR: So now your story is out, I mean it's only been, yah it hasn't been long but your story is out. And you are at this point where you're involved, you've become an advocate and someone who has a very distinct vision about the work that you would like, in a realm where you would like to impact change.

CL: Yah.

MR: So we've only got a few minutes.

CL: Yah so I'll wrap it up. My story might be over, my story is not over. So, I am going to push forward. I am suing the RCMP and the HRP. I do want to hold them accountable yes. You know and I'm not going to back down and I've already put you know, anyway. We're also going forward with the HRP, there's a Police Review Board hearing, and all of this stuff was going to happen after the criminal trial, right? So, it was like me looking at years down the road, like three to five years you know?

MR: Which is how the system usually works, cause there's nothing.

CL: Which is how the system works, which I think that they were very thankful for. And now it's to move a little bit faster, you know unfortunate circumstances, but it is going to move faster. So those are the next steps. But this is, you know, and I say it in the podcast, I feel like this is now, I'm going to be fighting for change for the rest of my days. This is who I am, this is what I'm passionate about, and I have big ideas and big dreams with this.

So, I will continue being loud, I will continue to get stronger. You know I think I mentioned earlier when we were doing introductions, I am working on a three-year project with other survivors. And I want to push for you know people with lived experience need to be the experts, right? We really need to be the experts in making the changes you know and that's sort of what this new project is going to be about. And I'm really excited about it, I'm still getting goosebumps about it, and it's looking at a new way for survivors to get healing and justice in a different way than the legal system.

MP: Thank you so much. This is work that Carrie has done for all of us, we are all very grateful.

CL: Thank you, take care everybody.

MR: People probably have a million questions.

CL: Oh yes, questions. So we can do questions later?

MR: Let's do five minutes.

CL: Okay.

Question: Was the prosecutor, are there going to be special prosecutors that are going to be trauma-informed?

CL: Specifically sexual assault cases yes.

MR: It's a new rule yah.

CL: Yah. And I think there's really that gap, that's missing is you know when this law came in place in the early 90s you know it was there to protect women, to protect people of sexualized violence and you know these publication bans were put in to protect the stigma around shame and guilt and all these other things. But you know in thirty years now there's no research.

It was supposed to entice more victims to come forward because of this publication ban and that's the piece that I want to talk about that in thirty

years now there is zero research to prove that having a publication ban actually entices people to come forward. And the missing piece for me was they didn't even tell me about it. Like I knew through just my own work and the people I was working with, we knew it was coming but we also were under the pretense that they would tell me. They would let me know when it's coming and that never happened. So that took away my choice and my consent and I feel like it's really important, especially for somebody who's going through sexual assault, we've already lost a lot of choice and consent and it's another harm put upon us and for me, I obviously didn't want it, I wanted to be public and yah it was another harm. So not trauma-informed.

Question: Thank you Carrie. I said earlier, I work in the civil legal system and I found it so interesting listening to the podcast that that's kind of where your hopes are pinned now and I know as a lawyer how frustrating that process can be for clients, so what can you tell us about how you're dealing with that in the sense and working with Mike Dull and how you find the civil litigation aspect?

CL: Well, I think, I mean I'm not really quite in it as far as I tend to really have you know a good answer to that question, but for me and where I'm at now, it's always you know yes there are, my perpetrator is out there, I don't think they're ever going to be arrested. I've had to work through a lot of healing, you know and trauma therapy to kind of not let it go, but just come to terms that there aren't going to be the arrests, there isn't going to be any closure and talking with other survivors and knowing that that isn't really justice anyway. And right now, and sort of really all along, my real focus has been when it comes to being public, it wasn't about you know putting my perpetrators, I honestly don't know who my perpetrators are, you know it was about the police failures and then of course, these other failures that I'm facing in the legal system. So, my fight for justice is the fight against these systems and to expose these failures and hopefully create change. So that's what my hope is through the lawsuit.

MR: Thank you Carrie.

CL: You're welcome.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

*Carrie Low* is an accomplished and acclaimed trauma-informed sexual assault advocate for survivors' rights in the Criminal Justice System in Nova Scotia. Carrie is the founder and peer facilitator of Survivors for Change & Empowerment and has been hosting this peer support group along with workshops since October 2020.

*Maggie Rahr* is an investigative journalist based in Halifax.