

Man goes undercover as a woman to investigate sexual harassment in Egypt

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CAIRO — Waleed Hammad dressed conservatively for his secret mission into the world of sexual harassment and abuse on the streets of Cairo, donning a long tan skirt and sleeved shirt, and at times covering his head like many Egyptian women.

The 24-year-old actor walked the sidewalks, hidden cameras in tow, for an investigative television report, hoping the broadcast would enlighten national debate about how to combat deep-rooted day-to-day sexual harassment and abuse in this patriarchal society.

Initiatives to counter the problem have mushroomed in recent months. Vigilantes groups have started protecting women at gatherings, particularly at large protests or during national holidays when groping and harassment in crowds is at an all-time high. Activists have offered self-defence classes for women. Social network sites have been started where women can “name and shame” their harassers.

On the other side of the debate are conservative religious clerics and some government officials who blame women, saying they invite harassment and sexual abuse by mixing with men. Their comments have inflamed the discourse, particularly at a time when Egypt’s volatile and polarized politics blur social and political issues following the 2011 uprising that ousted longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak.

As he strolled, Hammad, who wore light makeup to conceal hints of facial hair and accentuate his eyes, was hissed at and verbally abused. In one instance — when he was wearing a head veil — he was taken for a prostitute

and offered up to \$580 for one night.

“I can go wherever I want, do whatever I want very simply, very easily, very casually,” Hammad said. “For a woman, it boils down to her having to focus on how she breathes while she is walking. It is not just the walk. It is not just the clothes. It is not what she says or how she looks.”

As a woman walking down the street, “you have to be in a constant state of alertness.”

What Hammad experienced is something Egyptian women endure every day. While not new to Egypt’s conservative society, sexual harassment has grown increasingly violent and visible in the nation, which has an embattled police force and an absence of legislation to address it. Egyptian law defines and criminalizes assault, but not sexual harassment.

“What I learned is that this definitely is not a problem with men only,” Hammad said. “It is a problem, a deficiency in the entire society.”

A report last month carried out by a UN Women agency, Egypt’s Demographic Center, and the National Planning Institute found that more than 99% of hundreds of women surveyed in seven of the country’s 27 provinces reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment ranging from minor harassment to rape.

Moza Hassan, a women rights activist who works with the victims of sexual abuse, said the problem will fester as long as there are no laws to punish harassers, no investigations into violent abuse and the government fails to admit there is a problem.

This week, at a public meeting to make recommendations to Egyptian President Morsi Mohammed on how to address the problem, Omayma Kamel, presidential adviser on women affairs, said she was seeking realistic statistics on violence against women because she sensed real exaggeration of the numbers reported by some research centres, comments she repeated in media interviews.

Kamel is a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which emerged as the most powerful political faction in Egypt since the uprising. The group has recently criticized a UN document being drafted on violence against

women. The Brotherhood said it was “deceitful,” clashed with Islamic principles and undermined family values. The Brotherhood said it advocated sexual freedoms for women and the right to abortion “under the guise of sexual and reproductive rights.”

Besides the daily experience of harassment on the streets of Egypt, sexual assaults at anti-government protests, where women have been groped, stripped and even raped, have risen both in number and intensity during the past year of continued unrest in Egypt.

The United Nations said it had reports of 25 sexual assaults on women at political rallies at Tahrir Square, the centre of the uprising, in one week early this year. Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault, which patrolled the square, reported 19 incidents alone on Jan. 25 — the second anniversary of the start of the uprising — including a case of a teenager raped with a bladed instrument.

Abuse at political events has emboldened activists who seek change, but the television program wanted to show how all Egyptian women live daily with the fear of being sexually harassed or abused.

The program was an online hit, shared by thousands of viewers and lauded as brave, creative, and sparked a comparison between Egypt and other Arab countries.

Lena el-Ghadban, the senior reporter on the program, “Awel el Kheit” or “the Thread” which aired earlier this month on the private TV station ONTV, said the program sought to offer a fresh glimpse into the problem through the eyes of men.

“We want them to try to feel how women feel about sexual harassment,” el-Ghadban said. “If the man sees himself as the victim of sexual harassment maybe this could get him to think, ‘What am I doing?’”

Men interviewed for the program commonly blamed women for dressing or looking in ways that invited sexual harassment. At the same time, they disclosed how men bribed a coffee shop owner to spray water on the pavement so women would be prompted to lift their long conservative dresses.

They wanted to get a peek at their legs.