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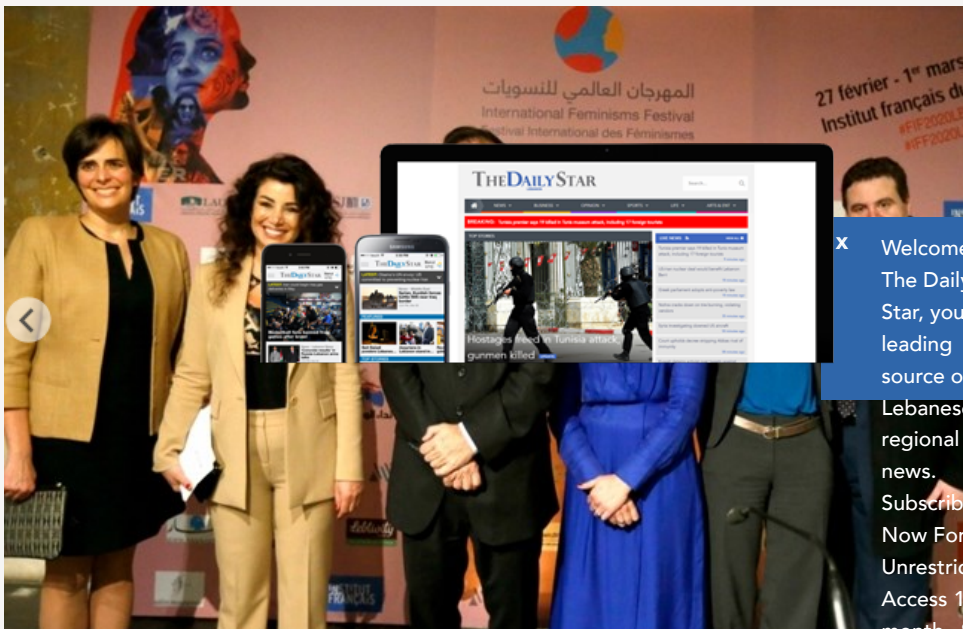
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BEIRUT: The Joumana Haddad Freedoms Center and the Institut Français du Liban launched the first edition of International Feminism Festival at Beit Beirut Thursday night, the first such festival in the Middle East.

"This is a festival about feminism in the whole world. As much as we think that the times have changed, women's rights are still lacking in

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the Arab world and the Western world. There's a lot of discrimination, injustice and that needs to change." Joumana Haddad, a Lebanese author and activist whose organization is hosting the festival, told The Daily Star.

The festival will run over three consecutive days and encompasses different forms of media, from films and theatrical performances to workshops and round table discussions.

The events will aim to highlight women's status in the Middle East and examine the history of feminism in contrast with the latest developments in the region.

The French Ambassador to Lebanon Bruno Foucher opened the floor by giving thanks to the hosts of the opening ceremony and praising the festival for shining a spotlight on women's rights.

However, he added, more work needs to be done in Lebanon to grant women basic rights, such as giving their nationality to their children and other "personal status" issues.

The event will provide different mediums of entertainment as well as discussions about the cause of feminist activism in Lebanon and the Middle East, with guest coming from different countries such as France and Canada.

"Each person can have a different perception to the cause with a different medium. It's always beautiful to be able to reach out at all levels, and each level is as important as the other. A feminist play can be just as important as a roundtable about women's rights," Haddad explained.

She also highlighted that the event is important to all societies and genders, as a cause for "all human beings who are interested in justice and human dignity."

"Some men might be alienated by the issue and this is showing them that they have a role to play."

For Mariam Mura, the director of the Arab Institute for Women, the festival should be noted for its role in shedding light on the inequalities between men and women in the Arab world.

"Gender inequality remains the greatest impediment in the region's progress," she said during the festival's opening ceremony.

"Social gender norms have been a major issue across the Arab states and women have been excluded from sole positions and institutional politics and other governmental important positions."

The Oct. 17 uprising was said to have inspired people across the region, and acted as inspiration for such a festival to be conceived.

"One of the main [sources of inspiration] came from the thawra [revolution] ... as it was in line with what people are interested in today and because women were at the forefront," Véronique Aulagnon, the director of the Institut du Français du Liban told The



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"It's not just one event, it's something that we want to sustain, with people from all regions. We are trying to help build up a network of feminists in the region, both women and men, who join forces for the cause of women."

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