

BELINDA STRONACH

Girls summit to precede G20

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Twenty young women from member countries invited to Toronto to discuss challenges facing the world's 3.3-billion females

Before the leaders of the world's wealthiest countries arrive in Ontario for the G8 and G20 summits, a select group of young women from around the globe will hold a summit of their own.

The G(irls) 20 Summit on pressing challenges related to girls and women — from education and maternal health to poverty and economics — will be held in Toronto from June 15 to 18, organizers announced Tuesday, making official a project that was quietly launched online in late March.

A woman aged 18 to 20 from each of the member countries of the G20 will be invited to Toronto at no expense for the first-of-its kind gathering, which is intended to raise awareness among world leaders of the role girls and women play in global economic productivity, and their often-untapped potential.

"You're going to get a different perspective because of the circumstances in which they've lived, the fact that they are girls, and the fact that they're young," said Farah Mohamed, president of The Belinda Stronach Foundation, which is leading a coalition of non-governmental organizations to host the summit.

Organizers are using social media and online tools, including Facebook, Twitter and Google Moderator, to reach out to a wide audience for ideas to shape the summit. Applications to attend will be accepted online at girlsandwomen.com until midnight, May 7.

Ms. Mohamed said more than 5,000 women have already registered on the website to get a randomly generated number symbolic of their place among the world's 3.3-billion females. The tag line "What's your number?" will feature prominently in an upcoming publicity campaign featuring Ms. Stronach, as well as on T-shirts created by Canadian designer Tu Ly, she said.

The summit will focus on the United Nations Millennium Development Goals affecting girls and women: improving maternal health, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, and achieving universal primary education.

Participants, who will be selected by a committee and notified later this month, will attend a series of presentations related to those goals. The young women will then be left to themselves to come up with a set of ideas and recommendations to be made public at a press conference, Ms. Mohamed said.

Canada has championed maternal health as its signature initiative at the G8 summit in Huntsville, Ont., a day before the larger G20 summit begins in June. However, the Harper government's decision to exclude abortion funding from the initiative has created divisions among member nations, opposition parties and agencies, many of whom argue that abortion is critical to reducing pregnancy-related deaths.

Ms. Mohamed said she couldn't predict whether or not the thorny issue will be discussed at the girls summit, noting the agenda will be determined by participants.

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“Maternal and child health is very much a discussion around access to medical services, it’s about understanding healthy choices and availability,” she said. “I fully expect that we will have an open dialogue and these girls will be able to talk about whatever it is that they wish to talk about and make the recommendations they see to be important to support girls.

Ms. Stronach, who was not available for comment Tuesday, is a proponent of safe and legal abortion. In an opinion piece published earlier this week, she warned against letting the abortion debate hijack the maternal health agenda.

“The debate about maternal health must never be allowed to stray too far from this basic truth: the vast majority of deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth can be prevented,” she wrote.

The G(irls) 20 Summit is supported by 20 NGOs, Google, Macro Blu and Veritas Communications. CTV and The Globe and Mail are media partners.