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G(irls)20 Summit aims for empowerment

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Queen's University economics major Hanan Dhanani has big dreams of changing the world by promoting microfinance in developing countries.

She hopes she'll come a few steps closer to realizing those dreams as the Canadian delegate to the G(irls)20 Summit in Paris, a meeting of 21 young women from around the world held before the G20 leaders meet.

Ms. Dhanani, 20, said she believes the summit will help her and other participants by giving them access to experts in areas such as development and communications. It will also give them a public platform to express their ideas collectively, which Ms. Dhanani said is key to getting other young people involved.

"We can show people that we may be young, but we have ideas," she said. "You learn so much about how to make things happen. For me, it's exciting because we are not being talked to, we are being talked with."

The meeting, which began Sunday and runs through the week, is the second G(irls)20 Summit. The first was held in June, 2010, in Toronto and ended with a communiqué that called for, among other things, better access to education and economic opportunities for girls and women.

Organized by the Belinda Stronach Foundation, the summit's goal is to encourage young women to get involved in a global debate about how to improve the lives of girls and women around the globe. Twenty-one delegates – one from each of the G20 members, plus one from Africa – will spend five days networking and attending workshops on topics such as empowerment, how girls and women can become "engines of growth," and the commodification of girls and women.

Belinda Stronach, executive chairman of Magna International and a former Liberal MP, said she doesn't know if any of the G20 leaders know about the meeting or will ever see the final communiqué.

But she said that last year's meeting produced concrete results, because several participants started their own development work or got involved with existing agencies.

“They were able to jump right into action and form a very powerful community,” she said, adding that her foundation has helped the young women by offering ongoing advice on government relations, building a business plan and dealing with the media.

The delegate from India, Tanvi Girotra, founded a non-profit organization that aims to create a platform for youth to tackle issues such as sex trafficking and the use of the arts to promote life-skills development.

The Italian delegate, Alberta Pelino, founded the Young Ambassadors Society, aimed at developing international dialogue among youth.

Ms. Stronach said her objective for this year’s summit is much the same as for last year: “to provide the platform and some of the tools for these young people to excel.”

Ms. Dhanani said discussing the objectification of women in the Western world is at the top of her agenda. She said that young women all over the globe feel the negative effects of over-sexualized images in Western advertising and pop culture. She said erasing those images would go a long way toward boosting girls’ confidence and encouraging them to develop their skills.