

BUSINESS INSIDER

Cuba's budding businesswomen are learning as they build



CAROLE SOLE, AFP
16H

The six women came to Mexico City to participate in the Women's Forum on Wednesday and Thursday, an international gathering of women, but also men, from politics, business and civil society to discuss social and economic issues.

They came with an arsenal of business cards with phone numbers, email addresses and even Facebook pages or business websites.

While they use the Internet, web access is very expensive and hard to come by in Cuba, where it is tightly controlled by the state.

Only 3.4 percent of households have Internet access, but the government is opening public WiFi hotspots and President Raul Castro has promised access to all Cubans by 2020.

"Our dreams and wishes include being able to export and through the Internet you can not only buy but also sell," said Caridad Luisa Limonta, who owns a workshop of seamstresses in Havana.

"If Cuba is opening up to the world, one of its potentials is to be able to export," she said.

Gradual changes

In the meantime, like many Cubans who can afford to travel, they take advantage of their trips to shop for the things they can't find in Cuba.

De la Rosa bought fabric for her children's decoration store, but it was a "limited" quantity to avoid problems



Yamil Lage, AFP/File

While Cuba's communist regime has implemented modest economic reforms, allowing some private ventures, running a business on the island remains a challenge.

with customs in Havana.

It's nothing compared to the stuff that Nidialys Acosta buys and brings on planes.

"For example, I've had car bumpers and fenders in my luggage," said Acosta, who since 2011 has run a business that repairs the famous classic American cars from the 1950s that are part of Cuba's street landscape and which are used as taxis for tourists.



Jorge Beltran, AFP/File

A woman receives her change in a store of Havana, Cuba on April 13, 2016.

Most of the six women used to work for the government but they entered the nascent private sector that Castro allowed after he succeeded his brother, Fidel, in 2008.

This has helped them earn more money in a country where the average monthly salary is \$24.

Only 10 percent of the island's labor force, or nearly half a million people, is in the private sector.

While the US-Cuba diplomatic thaw has raised hopes of change on the island and a potential end to the US trade embargo, the Communist Party Congress earlier in April suggested that Havana's opening to the world would remain slow.

"I think that there were a lot of expectations of sudden, quick changes, but I think the changes that are coming will be very gradual," Vicente said.