

Cuban women say their businesses are doing well

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Five Cuban women entrepreneurs share their experiences during a Startup Cuba event at Miami Dade College Friday.

One of the Cuban women makes fancy soaps. Another is a party planner, and a third owns a combination beauty parlor-gym. One owns a restaurant; another dreams of expanding her pizza parlor “to the rest of Cuba and more.”

Each used her own capital to launch her business. All are making good profits and hope to expand to new or better locales and new product lines, the women said at a conference Friday at Miami Dade College.

On a group visit to South Florida, the women — aged 20s to 40s — are some of

the players on the successful side of Cuba’s efforts to allow more private micro-enterprises.

Obtaining business licenses was not difficult, they said. None complained about high taxes, fees or bribe-seeking government inspectors — areas that have drawn complaints from other self-employed Cubans.

They are allowed to advertise with signs and posters, on Cuba’s version of the Yellow Pages and even on Conocehabana, an application for smartphones. They also can give discounts and other perks to frequent clients, the women said.

MDC professor Juan Antonio Blanco cautioned that despite the women’s positive experiences and optimism, Cuba currently does not have “the juridical and institutional structures” that most other countries have to guarantee private enterprise.

Without those guarantees, many questions hang over the future of micro-enterprises on the island nation, restricted to 201 specific categories, said Blanco, director of MDC’s Center for Latin American and Caribbean Initiatives.

Blanco’s caution echoed the comments made by opposition activist Eliecer Avila during a presentation Thursday night for the Cuba Research Institute at Florida International University.

Cuban ruler Raúl Castro's reforms are benefiting only "small sectors" of the country, such as restaurants in tourist areas or heavily populated neighborhoods like downtown Havana. But they are "not practical for the majority of Cubans," Avila said.

The five women are on a 10-day swing through the United States to talk about their experiences and meet with U.S. micro-businesses in their same fields. The trip was arranged by the Cuba Study Group, which favors closer U.S. relations with Havana.

Some of the women received training in private entrepreneurship through Cuba Emprende, a program run by the Catholic Church. Others said they found their own way to the micro-businesses that Cubans call auto-empleo — self-employment.

The entrepreneur speakers included Yamina Vicente Prado, a former professor of economics at the University of Havana, who said she started a party planning and decorating business, Decorazon, with her photographer sister because it required little capital.

Another, Decire Verdecia, started Decy Salon. Stylish black-and-white business cards list multiple services, including women's and men's hair, manicures, pedicures, facial and body massages and facial cleansings. The salon also acts as a gym.

Sandra Aldana, trained as a special education teacher, makes and sells the line of D'Brujas fancy soaps. Niuris Higuera runs Atelier, one of the best known restaurants in the Vedado section of Havana.

Marianella Perez said she hopes to soon open a second Pizzanella in Havana, then expand to the rest of Cuba and beyond. Higuera said she has eight projects in mind. The most important, she says, is a school for women interested in business.

For most of these micro-businesses, the clients are Cubans. For the Atelier restaurant, 85 percent of its diners are foreign, Higuera said, and her profit margin over a one-year period amounts to 20-25 percent.

The women said that many Cuban workers prefer to work for the private businesses because they offer better salaries and working conditions than the state bureaucracy.

Their main issues, the five women agreed, were finding appropriate equipment and locales for their businesses and steady sources and prices for supplies. Training to improve their businesses is also a struggle, they said.

Renting state-owned storefronts is a long and complicated process, they said; most require major repairs. Privately owned spaces are easier to rent but more expensive, and neither option fully answers questions about contract guarantees.

Despite their personal successes, countrywide enthusiasm for micro-businesses has waned since the Castro government began allowing private enterprise in 2008, they said.

Growth in the number of licenses issued for self-employment has clearly slowed. The most recent official figures show that only 455,577 of Cuba's 11 million residents hold business licenses. Of those, nearly 58,000 were for the making and sale of food and 48,000 for the transportation of passengers and cargo, two businesses that together accounted for

92,000 hired workers. Another 30,000 licenses were issued for the rental of homes or rooms.

“The tide is beginning to drop, said one of the women.

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