Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to in a letter to Harry S. Truman “No one won the last war and no one will win the next.” Eleanor was referring to the World Wars but the reality is that for all wars there are unintended consequences that make the victories hollow. Negative consequences come from even a war that was considered won from unnecessary deaths that break apart a family to the destructions of homes and land. These consequences can even be more severe when they occur within a Civil War such as the one that lasted twelve years in El Salvador (Rosenberg). The book One Day of Life by Manlio Argueta will be used to illustrate a few of these consequences of war as we look at the life of Lupe Guardado, the main figure in the novel. In this paper, the Salvadoran family will be focused upon, along with the impacts of civil war on the family and migration.

Family relationships are tremendously significant in the Salvadoran culture. I will demonstrate the significance of family values and traditions as I present examples of Salvadoran families during the Civil War in El Salvador. The family bonds in El Salvador go far beyond the nuclear family to include grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Neighbors and friends are often included in family occasions and considered to be family. Even though these relationships encompass a broad range of people in the context of family, the ties between these people are strong (El Salvador). Salvadorans value how an individual relates to others and the part they play in the community more than personal successes. This is especially true the further one moves away from urban areas (El Salvador). Catholicism is at the foundation of many traditions and
beliefs. The holidays of Holy Week and Christmas reveal the importance of heritage and traditions within the family as much time is spent together. Catholicism may play a role in family dynamics with the male typically being the head of the household and main breadwinner. In 1994, the average Salvadoran woman of childbearing age has four live births, higher than many other countries (FAO Corporate). Lupe Guardado from One Day of Life has five living children in the story but has lost other children to sickness and disease. In third world countries, many children die before the age of five from disease or malnutrition and those that survive are the parent’s security for the future. Various aspects of the family life and each of these areas that compose it were impacted by the Civil War in El Salvador.

Civil War brought changes to family dynamics in El Salvador. These changes are not a new phenomenon with El Salvador’s Civil War; however if one looks back in history at past wars there are changes in the landscape of the culture and the roles of individuals are redefined. Between 1979 and 1991, seventy five thousand lives were taken by the civil war and many of these were innocent villagers (Rosenburg 55). As the number of men were diminishing either to leave to fight in the war or already killed, the women needed to change. Felipa Diaz joined the guerrillas after the town of El Limon was attacked and her father shot to death. Bringing two of her children along, Felipa worked as a medic while carrying her gun; her three other children remained in hiding with her mother. The children disappeared after the troops took them away: her daughter was killed, one son was raised by an upper class Salvadoran family and the last was adopted by an American couple. Felipa’s story is just one of the sad tales of families that were torn apart by the war as women’s roles moved outside of the home (Rosenberg). Lupe cared and protected her granddaughter Adolfina in One Day of Life as she does not allow the soldiers to take her saying, “You will understand that she is a child and she has been entrusted to me, she’s
my granddaughter. I can’t let anything happen to her while she is in my care. Take me” (Argueta 167).

As some mothers fought along with the men, other mothers needed to take over more responsibility for the family and farm work. In 1992, between 42% and 60% of rural households in El Salvador were headed by women depending on the area they lived in (FAO Corporate). Long hours are put into planting and working the crops, tending to livestock, carrying water and firewood besides the more traditional roles of cooking. The children need to work to help support the family. Over 80% of the rural population is below the poverty line. A vicious cycle is created because of the poor cropland and the women’s inability to qualify for loans for fertilizer or other crop expenses to increase the productivity of the land. Loans are difficult to receive unless you the head of the household; however the banks and government will not acknowledge the women’s position as the head of the household (FAO Corporate). Lupe had dealt with these same problems and has concerns about taking care of her family knowing that Jose is dead. She shares these concerns when she states: “Now it will be up to me. To take care of the three little children. I don’t know if there will be enough to go around” (Argueta 201).

Migration out of El Salvador affected the family life as the civil war waged on and has continued at high rates despite the resolution of war. There is both a social and a financial cost to migration. The cost for one person to migrate to the United States, where 90% choose to relocate to, can be up to eight thousand dollars. Because of these cost, only one member of the family leaves the country with the intention of sending for the rest later. A middle class citizen may overstay a visa but poorer migrants tend to leave without documentation, costing more money, on riskier journeys by train and foot through Mexico led by a network of coyotes (Andrade-Eekhoff). Men were typically the first to leave the country looking for a better life but as
women’s roles have changed to be the primary breadwinner of the family this statistic has changed. Migration separates the family system forcing communications across the borders. The extended family increasingly plays a role in the care and upbringing of the children while the family is separated. The elders tend to lose their social support system as their children leave the country (Landolt 637). Remittances from family living outside of El Salvador contribute greatly to the family expenses and the economy of El Salvador. In 2004, 22% of the households received remittances accounting for 16% of El Salvador’s Gross National Product (Andrade-Eekhoff). This income helps make certain that the children continue their education, helps to support the elderly and provides more modern conveniences such as water in newer homes. The remittances also keep the individuals connected to their families in El Salvador and their home communities. The money is sent out of duty and honor (Herndandez). Remittances begin to level out the class differences among the people but also makes them aware of what other’s have or do not have. Before every one in the neighborhood was poor and no one was aware of the differences between each other but the American epidemic of wanting more possessions seeps into their culture (Andrade-Eekhoff).

The civil war led to more than changes in the family dynamics but to other underlying belief systems. Catholicism is at the core of their belief system but even this strong tradition can be rocked. Salvadorans inherently believe in the human integrity and goodness in people but after years of civil war have become leery of leaders. In the book One Day of Life, Lupe feels this fear as she talks with the priest, “The presence of a priest, with all his seeming saintliness, produced nothing but fear and suspicion in us” (Argueta 24). The suspicions of others and the apprehension towards leadership most likely kept the community close knit. Spousal separation from migration and war has led to a high rate of open unions and children born outside of
wedlock leading to decay in the family structure (Landolt 635). There has been an increase in American gang style violence with the break down of the family structure and with the increase in the numbers of illegal immigrants who are deported back to El Salvador (Hernandez). El Salvador has one of the highest murder rates in Latin America with four times the murders of New York City each year (Rosenberg). Lastly, women learned to take charge of their families and their selves during the civil war but as the country settled down women were expected to return to their pre-war status in a male dominated society (Padilla). Some women were left alone to fend for their families but yet had no rights as the head of the household. A new struggle for women rights was created by their new found independence during the war. Women came to the understanding that repression is not only on the basis of class but gender (Padilla). The struggle against oppression continues.

As we have looked at the Salvadoran family and the many hardships they have endured through the civil war and post war, it is clear to see that the family has been impacted in many ways. The extended family has become transcontinental making the communication and continuation of traditions more difficult, leading to decline in the family value system. Women have had to step into new roles as the head of the household during these times. War does not end because victory has been declared. There is always another fight ahead. For women, in El Salvador they now need to fight for their equal rights as citizens. The war continues on.

Work Cited


