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 reality is any war every won. 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. This significance will be demonstrated as the family values, traditions and examples are presented. 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 had five children. 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 but if one looks back in history at past wars; war changes the landscape of our culture and redefines the roles of individuals. 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 Adelfina 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 of 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 contributes to this because of the poor cropland and the women’s inability to qualify for loans for fertilizer or other expenses because they were not consider the head of the household (FAO Corporate). Lupe had these same concerns about taking care of her family knowing that Jose was dead, “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 locate to, can be up to eight thousand dollars. Only one member of the family leaves with the intention sending for the rest because of these cost. A middle class citizen may over stay a visa but poorer migrants tend to leave without documentation, costing more money, on riskier journeys by train and foot through Mexico lead 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 but the remittances also keep the individual
connected to their family and home community. The money is sent out of duty and honor.
(Herndandez) Remittances begin to levels out the class differences slightly but also makes
individuals aware of what other’s have, before every one in the neighborhood was poor and no
one knew the difference (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 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 the increase numbers of illegal immigrants 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 to no rights. A new struggle for women rights was created by their new found independence, 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 there is always another fight ahead. For women in El Salvador they not need to fight for their equal rights as citizens.

Work Cited


