

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. GABRIEL SINFUEGO, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

Ponente: DIMAAMPAO, J.

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DIMAAMPAO, J.:

Incestuous rape of a daughter by a father has heretofore been bitterly and vehemently denounced by this Court as more than just a shameful and shameless crime. Rape in itself is a nauseating crime that deserves the condemnation of all decent persons who recognize that a woman's cherished chastity is hers alone to surrender at her own free will, and whoever violates this norm descends to the level of the odious beast. But the act becomes doubly repulsive where the outrage is perpetrated on one's own flesh and blood for the culprit is further reduced to a level lower than the lowly animal and forfeits all respect otherwise due him as a human being.[1]

In an Information[2] dated 28 April 2009, accused-appellant Gabriel Sinfuego (SINFUEGO) was indicted for the crime of Rape in relation to Republic Act No. 7610,[3] the inculpatory averments of which read:

“That on or about December 27, 2008, in the evening, at Brgy. Bomitog, Banna, Ilocos Norte, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, motivated by lewd designs and thru force and intimidation, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously have sexual intercourse with one AAA[4] his fourteen (14) year old daughter, against her will and consent.

CONTRARY TO LAW.”[5]

Upon arraignment, SINFUEGO pled not guilty[6] to the offense charged. During the pre-trial conference, the parties stipulated on the following facts:

- “1. The Court has jurisdiction over the case;
2. The identity of the accused is admitted in that he is the same person who was charged and arraigned under the information;
3. The accused is also known as Gabrielano;
4. The private complainant was only fourteen (14) years old on December 27, 2008, the date of the incident, subject matter of the instant case, she having been born on April 24, 1994;
5. The private complainant is the daughter of the accused;
6. The accused and the mother of the private complainant were not yet married when the private complainant was born due to the minority of the mother of the private complainant reason for which she uses the surname Tenedor;
7. The mother of the private complainant and the accused were married on December 8, 1995 after the private complainant was born; and(,)
8. At the time of the alleged incident, the accused and the private complainant were living in Barangay Bumitog, Banna, Ilocos Norte.”[7]

Thereafter, trial on the merits ensued.

The version of the prosecution[8] unfurls as follows:

SINFUEGO and CCC got married in 1995. They have five children, two of whom are AAA and BBB. In May 2008, CCC told SINFUEGO to go and live in Barangay Bumitog, Banna, Ilocos Norte while she remained in Barangay Miramar, Magsingal, Ilocos Sur. He left, taking with him AAA.

During the 2008 Christmas break, BBB spent her holidays with AAA and SINFUEGO at Barangay Bumitog. At around 3:00 o'clock early in the morning of 27 December 2008, AAA was sleeping with her brother BBB inside their house when SINFUEGO held her hands and removed her shorts as well as her panty. In a jiff, he went on top of her, and inserted his penis to her vagina. SINFUEGO then told AAA, "If you will report this, I will kill you with your mother." [9] Then, he left. AAA was angry about what had happened to her.

BBB, who was asleep at that time, was awakened when SINFUEGO put him aside. BBB witnessed the incident as narrated by his sister, AAA.

CCC went to Barangay Bumitog on 5 January 2009 to fetch BBB. That evening, BBB told her, "I have something to tell you mama." [10] He divulged that SINFUEGO had gone on top of his sister and had raped her. CCC then asked, "Why did you not tell that to me when we were there this afternoon?" [11] He answered, "I was afraid because papa threatened me." [12]

Immediately, CCC returned to Barangay Bumitog that same night to fetch AAA. CCC rode on a motorcycle and was accompanied by her sister's husband. When they arrived thereat, SINFUEGO and his companions were drinking. CCC saw AAA leaning on the back of her father. CCC called AAA and asked about what her brother had told her. AAA cried and confirmed what had happened to her. CCC then related to go home with her even without bringing her clothes. At first, AAA refused but when she agreed, SINFUEGO went near them and threatened them. He picked up a stone and threw it at them. CCC kept mum and just boarded the motorcycle and went home.

Eventually, AAA, assisted by CCC, filed a Complaint against SINFUEGO. A certain Dr. Ernella Agulay (Dr. Agulay), a pediatrician and the coordinator of the Women and Children Protection Unit (WCPU) of the Mariano Marcos Memorial Hospital and Medical Center of Batac, Ilocos Norte, conducted a physical examination on AAA. The examination yielded the following results:

"xxx

ANO-GENITAL EXAMINATION

EXTERNAL GENITALIA No evident sign of injury at the time of exam

URETHRA AND PERIURETHRAL AREA No evident sign of injury at the time of exam

PERIHYMENAL AREA AND FOSSA NAVICULARIS

No evident sign of injury at the time of exam

HYMEN Fimbriated, absent hymenal tissue at 4-5 o'clock, notch at 8 o'clock

PERINEUM No evident sign of injury at the time of exam

x x x x x

IMPRESSIONS

Findings diagnostic of previous blunt force penetrating injury”[13]

SINFUEGO[14] denied the crime charged against him, asseverating that he could not in conscience rape AAA, his own daughter. He asserted that CCC merely fabricated the whole incident so that she could freely have other relationships.

At around 8:00 o'clock in the morning of 26 December 2008, SINFUEGO avowed that he was at the house of Franklin Morella (Franklin), the husband of his sister, to help in the butchering of a pig. They finished at 10:00 o'clock in the morning. After cooking, they served the food followed by a drinking spree together with Franklin, as well as Florante, Efren and Arnel, all surnamed Morella. When SINFUEGO felt tipsy, he went to sleep in Franklin's house and woke up in the morning of the following day, 27 December 2008. Thereafter, he helped in the preparation of a rice delicacy called “dudol.” He and his companions continued their drinking spree. As before, he slept when he felt inebriated. At around 9:00 o'clock in the morning, he decided to go home. Finding no one upon his arrival, he left for the fields; when he came back at around 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon, AAA and BBB were still not around.

SINFUEGO's avowals were corroborated by Franklin[15] and his friend, Florante.

Franklin professed that SINFUEGO was indeed at his house on 26 and 27 December 2008 to help in the preparation for the baptism and birthday of his grandchild. SINFUEGO never left his house as he was drunk on these days. He went home on 28 December.

Florante,[16] for his part, testified that he was with SINFUEGO on 27 December 2008. During their drinking spree, it was SINFUEGO who first became intoxicated, lay down on the bamboo bed near the place where they were drinking, and who, when he (Florante) was about to go home at around midnight, was still on the said bed.

On 15 April 2011, the Regional Trial Court, First Judicial Region of Laoag City, Branch 11, rendered a Decision,[17] in Crim. Case No. 14032, the fallo of which reads:

“WHEREFORE, judgment is hereby rendered finding Gabriel Sinfuego, the accused herein, GUILTY BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT of the crime of rape. He is hereby sentenced to the penalty of RECLUSION PERPETUA. Further, pursuant to prevailing jurisprudence, he is hereby ordered to pay the private complainant the following:

1. The amount of P75,000.00 as civil indemnity;
2. The amount of P75,000.00 as moral damages; and
3. The amount of P25,000.00 as exemplary damages.

SO ORDERED.”[18]

Unruffled, SINFUEGO (now, appellant) comes to Us via this Appeal, raising a solitary error—

THE TRIAL COURT GRAVELY ERRED IN FINDING THE ACCUSED-APPELLANT GUILTY OF THE CRIME CHARGED DESPITE THE PROSECUTION'S FAILURE TO PROVE HIS GUILT BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT.

After a judicious scrutiny of the record, We affirm the conviction of appellant.

First off, it bears emphasis that ultimately and frequently, the resolution of the charge of rape hinges on the credibility of the victim's testimony. We have consistently relied on the assessment of such credibility by the trial

court, because the factual findings of the trial court, particularly those bearing on such assessment, are the product of the trial judge's peculiar opportunity to observe the deportment and demeanor of the witnesses while they personally appear and testify during the trial, as contrasted with Our dependence on the mute pages of the records of the trial. This consistent reliance proceeds from the reality that the trial judge is in the best position to detect that frequently thin line between truth and prevarication that determines the guilt or innocence of the accused. Thus, We will not disturb the credence the trial court accorded to the testimonies of the witnesses unless the trial court is shown to have overlooked or arbitrarily disregarded facts and circumstances of significance in the correct resolution of the case.[19]

In the case at bench, We rule and so hold that the court a quo neither overlooked nor ignored any fact or circumstance of significance. Indeed, it correctly appreciated the evidence and properly concluded that appellant ravished AAA, his own daughter. It unerringly ruled that AAA and BBB are credible witnesses.

In her direct examination, AAA recounted with forthrightness and consistency her sexual ordeal in the hands of appellant, viz—

“Q You said you were raped by Gabriel Sinfuego. What did he do to you that you say you were raped by him?

A He held my hands, ma'am.

Q And then, what did you do next when he held your hands?

A He removed my shorts, ma'am.

Q How about him, what did he do before he removed your shorts?

A He removed his shirt, ma'am.

Q You said he removed his shirt before he removed your shorts. Will you tell us what was he wearing from waist up at that time? (sic)

A None, ma'am.

Q You said he removed your shorts. What did he do next when he removed your shorts?

A My panty, ma'am.

Q What did he do next after removing your panty?

x x x x x x x x

PROS. PABLO

Q What did he do to your panty when you said panty?

A He removed, ma'am.

Q What happened next?

A He put his penis, ma'am.

Q Where did he put his penis?

A In my vagina, ma'am.

Q How did he position himself in relation to you when he put his penis inside your vagina?

A He was lying on top of me facing the ground, ma'am.

Q When he went on top of you, what did he do next?

x x x x x x x x

PROS. PABLO

Q What did he remove?

A His penis, ma'am.

Q What did you feel when he removed his penis?

A I was angry, ma'am.

Q Why were you so angry?

A Because of what happened to me, ma'am.

Q Where were you at the time when your father came to rape you, Madam Witness?

A Exactly in our house, ma'am.

Q Will you tell us where is your house located or situated?

A Barangay Bumitog, ma'am.

Q Where is this Barangay Bumitog?

A Banna, Ilocos Norte, ma'am."[20] (Emphasis Ours)

The foregoing testimony was corroborated by BBB who witnessed the whole incident—

“Q While you were on vacation on December 27, 2008 in Banna, Ilocos Norte, do you remember if there was anything unusual that transpired?

A Yes, ma'am.

Q Can you tell us what was that unusual incident that transpired?

A They went on top of each other (nagrinnabaw da), ma'am.

Q When you said they were on top of each other or 'nagrinnabaw da', who are you referring to?

A My father and AAA, ma'am.

Q Where were you when you saw them on top of each other?

A I was in between them but I was placed aside, ma'am.

Q You said you were originally in between them but you were placed aside. In between whom?

A My father and AAA, ma'am.

Q Who put you aside?

A My father, ma'am.

Q By the way, you said you were originally in between them and then you were put aside. What were you doing then when you were put aside?

A I was sleeping, ma'am.

Q What happened when you were put aside?

A They went on top of each other, ma'am.

Q Who went on top of whom?

A My father, ma'am.

Q Can you describe to us what you saw your father of being on top of AAA?

A My father was naked, ma'am.

Q When you said naked(,) was your father naked from the waist down or from the shoulder down to the waist?

A From shoulder down, ma'am.

Q What did your father do while he was on top of AAA?

A He hit it (intirana), ma'am.

Q What do you mean when you said he hit it (intirana)?

A He did a push and pull motion, ma'am.

Q While your father was doing the push and pull motion, how about your sister, what was then her position?

A She was lying down, ma'am.

Q Can you tell us what sort of clothing was she then wearing?

A Colored white, ma'am.

Q Was she also naked at that time while your father was doing the push and pull motion?

A Yes, ma'am.

Q Where was she naked? Was she naked from the waist down or from the shoulder down?

A From the waist down, ma'am.

Q You said you were put aside. How far were you at the time when you saw your father on top of AAA?

A Just beside them, ma'am.

Q By the way, Mr. Witness, where were you then lying?

A At the floor, ma'am.

Q How about your father and your sister, where were they then while your father was on top of AAA?

A They were also on the floor, ma'am.”[21]

Moreover, AAA's testimony that appellant raped her jibed with the results of the physical examination done by Dr. Agulay on her. This ineluctably bolstered her credibility. It is well-settled that when the victim's testimony is corroborated by the physician's finding of penetration, there is sufficient foundation to conclude the existence of the essential requisites of carnal knowledge.[22]

In a bid to exculpate himself, appellant assails the credibility of witnesses AAA, BBB and CCC. Appellant accentuated the following inconsistencies, viz:

- In her direct testimony, AAA alleged that she was sleeping with her brother, BBB, when appellant raped her on 27 December 2008. This was contrary to her statement during cross examination wherein she averred that on said date, she was at the house of her aunt whereas BBB was with CCC in Magsingal, Ilocos Sur.[23]
- The testimonies of AAA, BBB and CCC differ with respect to the date when the rape incident was reported to CCC. AAA declared that it was narrated to CCC on the night after rape. BBB, on the other hand, said that it was on 2 January 2009 that he told his mother. According to CCC, it was on the 5th of January 2009.[24]
- AAA said that she was wearing a black t-shirt at the time of rape. This was in contrast to BBB's declaration that she had a white shirt on at that time.[25]

Therewithal, appellant claimed that AAA's accusation of rape is doubtful. It is unthinkable why AAA failed to shout knowing that her brother was just beside her at the time of the alleged incident or to offer any resistance. She did not even call on her aunt immediately after the rape when the latter's house was just near the house of her father. AAA's attitude after the purported rape belied the occurrence thereof. She still continued to live with him.[26] Likewise, when CCC came to get her after the alleged incident, CCC saw AAA leaning at the back of appellant, as if he did not do any atrocious act against her.[27] So, too, AAA, BBB and CCC had an ill-motive against him. AAA pointed to appellant as the rapist when Melecio Sinfuego, the real culprit, could not be found. As for BBB, he admitted that he hated his father because he spanked him. On the part of CCC, she wanted to break loose from him so she could be with her lover.

Appellant's arguments fail to sway Us.

Our jurisprudence is replete with iterations that for a discrepancy or inconsistency in the testimony of a witness to serve as a basis for acquittal, it must establish beyond doubt the innocence of the appellant for the crime charged since the credibility of a rape victim is not diminished, let alone impaired, by minor inconsistencies in her testimony. We have also declared that inconsistencies in the testimonies of witnesses, when referring only to minor details and collateral matters, do not affect the substance of their declaration, their veracity or the weight of their testimonies, moreover, they do not impair the credibility of the witnesses where there is consistency in relating the principal occurrence and positive identification of the assailants.[28]

Here, the alleged inconsistencies cut no ice with the fact that AAA categorically identified appellant as the one who raped her on 27 December 2008. The inconsistent statements pointed out by appellant merely affect minor details which do not significantly alter the integrity of the prosecution witnesses' narration concerning the incident of rape which is the subject matter of this case. Given AAA's and BBB's testimonies, it cannot be gainsaid that on that unfortunate date, both of them were in the house of appellant.

Anent the contention that AAA's attitude during and after the alleged rape made her accusation doubtful, We find the same specious. A victim of a heinous crime such as rape cannot be expected to act with reason or in conformity with society's expectations. This acquires greater significance where the victim is a child of tender age. The workings of a human mind placed under emotional stress cannot be predicted; and people cannot be expected to act as usual in an unfamiliar situation. Furthermore, it is not accurate to say that there is a standard reaction or norm of behavior among rape victims, as each of them had to deal with different circumstances.[29] Indeed, the failure to shout or offer tenuous resistance does not make voluntary the victim's submission to the criminal acts of the accused since, as heretofore explicated, rape is subjective and not everyone responds in the same way to an attack by a sexual fiend.[30] In this case, appellant is AAA's father. Obviously, AAA was cowed not to offer any resistance and merely do whatever she was told to do when appellant, who unmistakably has a moral ascendancy and influence over her, threatened to kill her and her mother.[31]

Along the same vein, imputation of ill-motive deserves scant consideration. Sans any hesitation, AAA pointed to appellant as her rapist aside from a certain Melecio Sinfuego.[32] Truly, not even the most ungrateful and resentful daughter would push her own father to the wall as the fall guy in any crime unless the accusation against him is true. As has been repeatedly ruled, no young girl would concoct a sordid tale of so serious a crime as rape at the hands of her own father, undergo medical examination, then subject herself to the stigma and embarrassment of a public trial, if her motive were other than a fervent desire to seek justice.[33]

Invariably, We accord credence to the testimonial avowals of BBB and CCC. To Our mind, even if BBB was spanked by appellant, this could not be sufficient reason for him to accuse his father of such a serious crime as rape. Any other member of the victim's family would not dare to publicly expose the dishonor of the family, if such accusation is against a fellow member of the family, unless the crime was, in fact, committed.[34] As for CCC, We find it hard to comprehend that she would sacrifice her own daughter and present her to be the subject of a public trial if she, in fact, had not been motivated by an honest desire to have the culprit punished.[35] Indeed, it is unnatural for a parent to use her daughter as an engine of malice or revenge, especially if doing so would subject her to embarrassment and even stigma.[36]

With the foregoing discourse, We find and so rule that the prosecution was able to demonstrably establish the guilt of appellant beyond reasonable doubt. Consequently, the presumption of innocence having been overcome, it becomes inevitable for the defense to bear the burden of evidence to show reasonable doubt as to appellant's guilt.[37] This, the defense lamentably failed to do so.

Professing innocence of the accusation, appellant merely interposed the defenses of denial and alibi. Evidently, this cannot sustain his acquittal for rape. Both denial and alibi are inherently weak defenses which cannot prevail over the positive and credible testimony of the prosecution witness that the accused committed the crime. Thus, as between a categorical testimony which has a ring of truth on one hand, and a mere denial and alibi on the other, the former is generally held to prevail. Moreover, for the defense of alibi to prosper, the appellant must prove that he was somewhere else when the offense was committed and that he was so far away that it was not possible for him to have been physically present at the place of the crime or at its immediate vicinity at the time of its commission. [38]

AAA herself straightforwardly declared that appellant ravished her. It is not disputed that the house of Franklin was merely two kilometers away from the house of appellant.[39] In actual fact, Franklin admitted that he could reach the house of appellant merely by walking.[40] In sooth, the defense failed to show the physical impossibility of appellant to commit the crime charged. The testimonies of Franklin and Florante could hardly carry the day for appellant. Case law has it that for alibi to prosper, it is necessary that the corroboration is credible, the same having been offered preferably by disinterested witnesses.[41] On this score, the corroborative testimonies of Franklin, appellant's brother-in-law, and Florante, a friend, are devoid of any legal mooring to reinforce his alibi. A sedulous evaluation of their testimonies failed to show that they were constantly with the latter and were therefore aware of his actions.

In synthesis, the court a quo irreproachably found appellant guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of incestuous rape. However, We find that a modification of the penalty is in order. Upon this point, the doctrinal teaching of the Supreme Court in *People v. Vidaña* is quite illuminating:

“In the case at bar, appellant was accused in the information with feloniously having carnal knowledge of his own minor daughter against her will by using his influence as a father. Considering further that the minority of AAA and her relationship to appellant were both alleged in the information and proven in court, the proper designation of appellant's felony should have been qualified rape. As such, the penalty of reclusion perpetua without eligibility of parole, in lieu of the death penalty, pursuant to Republic Act No. 9346 must be imposed. Furthermore, in line with jurisprudence, the award of moral damages should be increased to P75,000.00 in addition to the award of civil indemnity and exemplary damages in the amounts of P75,000.00 and P30,000.00, respectively. Likewise, interest at the rate of 6% per annum shall be imposed on all damages awarded from the date of the finality of this judgment until fully paid. (Emphasis Ours).”[42]

Appropriately, appellant should be sentenced to a penalty of reclusion perpetua without eligibility of parole, in lieu of the death penalty, pursuant to Republic Act No. 9346. Withal, the award of exemplary damages must be increased to P30,000.00 and an interest at the rate of 6% per annum must be imposed on all damages awarded from the date of the finality of this judgment until fully paid.

WHEREFORE, the Decision dated 15 April 2011 of the Regional Trial Court, First Judicial Region of Laoag City, Branch 11, in Crim. Case No. 14032, is hereby **AFFIRMED** with the following **MODIFICATIONS**:

- Accused-appellant GABRIEL SINFUEGO is sentenced to a penalty of reclusion perpetua without eligibility of parole, in lieu of the death penalty, pursuant to Republic Act No. 9346.
- The award of exemplary damages is increased to P30,000.00.
- An interest at the rate of six per cent (6%) per annum is imposed on all damages awarded from the date of the finality of this judgment until fully paid.

SO ORDERED.

Ybañez, and bueser,* JJ., concur.

* Vice Justice Carmelita S. Manahan, per Office Order No. 123-14-ABR dated 2 April 2014.

[1] *People v. Nicolas*, 324 SCRA 748, 756 (4 February 2000). (Italics supplied)

[2] Original Record, p. 1.

[3] Otherwise known as, An Act Providing for Stronger Deterrence and Special Protection Against Child Abuse,

Exploitation and Discrimination.

[4] In accordance with the ruling of the Supreme Court in *People v. Cabalquinto*, 502 SCRA 419, 425-426 (19 September 2006).

[5] Original Record, p. 1.

[6] *Id.*, p. 28.

[7] *Id.*, p. 37.

[8] TSN, 3 November 2009, pp. 10-19; 19 January 2010, pp. 28-36; 2 February 2010, pp. 41-46; 16 February 2010, pp. 51-57.

[9] TSN, 3 November 2009, p. 15.

[10] *Id.*, 19 January 2010, p. 33.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Original Record, p. 83.

[14] TSN, 22 February 2011, 72-79.

[15] TSN, 7 September 2010.

[16] *Id.*, 21 January 2011, pp. 2-8.

[17] Original Record, pp. 142-158.

[18] *Id.*, p. 158.

[19] See *People v. Buado, Jr.*, 688 SCRA 82, 95-96 (8 January 2013).

[20] TSN, 3 November 2009, pp. 11-13.

[21] TSN, 2 February 2010, pp. 44-46.

[22] *People v. Batula*, 686 SCRA 575, 586 (28 November 2012).

[23] See *Rollo*, p. 43.

[24] See *Ibid.*

[25] See *Ibid.*

[26] See *Id.*, p. 44.

[27] See *Ibid.*

[28] *People v. Cuaycong*, G.R. No. 196051 (2 October 2013).

[29] See *People v. Banzuela*, G.R. No. 202060 (11 December 2013).

[30] See *People v. Vidaña*, G.R. No. 199210 (23 October 2013).

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] TSN, 17 November 2009, pp. 26-27.

[33] See *People v. Venturina*, 680 SCRA 508, 516 (12 September 2012).

[34] See *People v. Nazareno*, 551 SCRA 16, 41-42 (9 April 2008).

[35] See *People v. Rayon, Sr.*, 689 SCRA 745, 756 (30 January 2013).

[36] See *Ibid.*

[37] See *People v. Belen*, 383 SCRA 314, 320 (10 June 2002).

[38] See *People v. Piosang*, 697 SCRA 587, 596-597 (5 June 2013).

[39] TSN, 7 September 2010, p. 68.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] See *People v. Vidaña*, G.R. No. 199210 (23 October 2013).

[42] G.R. No. 199210 (23 October 2013).

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