

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, APPELLEE, VS. FLORANTE RELANES ALIAS “DANTE,” APPELLANT.*G.R. No. 175831. April 12, 2011*

Ponente: DEL CASTILLO, J.

Read online (full-text search, related cases, audio case brief): <https://batas.org/library/g-r-no-175831/>**DEL CASTILLO, J.:**

Oftentimes in criminal cases, the issue presented for resolution is mostly confined to a question of credibility, a weighing of the prosecution's evidence against that of the defense. "In rape cases, if the testimony of the victim passes the test of credibility, the accused may be convicted solely on that basis"[1] for "[r]ape is generally unwitnessed and oftentimes, the victim is left to testify for herself." [2] From our thorough review of the instant case, we find that the trial court, as well as the appellate court, committed no reversible error in extending superior credit to the prosecution's evidence particularly the victim's testimony.

This is an automatic review of the Decision[3] of the Court of Appeals (CA) dated March 17, 2006 in CA-G.R. CR No. 00675 affirming with modification the Joint Decision[4] dated October 29, 2004 of the Regional Trial Court (RTC), Fifth Judicial Region, Branch 51, Sorsogon City, in Criminal Case Nos. 2003-5882 and 2003-5883, finding herein appellant Florante Relanes guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of rape, in both cases, committed against his own daughter "AAA"[5] and imposing on him the supreme penalty of death for each act of rape.

Appellant was charged in two separate Informations both dated March 14, 2003 with the crime of rape committed against "AAA," his own daughter, during the first week of August 2002 and on January 9, 2003. The Informations upon which appellant stood indicted read as follows:

CRIMINAL CASE NO. 2003-5882

That sometime in the first week of August 2002 at Barangay "CCC," Municipality of "DDD," Province of "EEE," Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused with lewd designs, armed with a bolo and by means of force, threat and intimidation, did, then and there, willfully, unlawfully and felonious[ly], have sexual intercourse with "AAA," his 13-year old daughter, thereby impregnating her, against her will, to her damage and prejudice.

CONTRARY TO LAW.[6]

CRIMINAL CASE NO. 2003-5883

That on or about the 9[th] day of January, 2003, at Barangay "CCC," Municipality of "DDD," Province of "EEE," Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused with lewd designs, armed with a bolo and by means of force, threat and intimidation, did, then and there, willfully, unlawfully and felonious[ly], have sexual intercourse with "AAA," his 14-year old daughter, thereby impregnating her, against her will, to her damage and prejudice.

CONTRARY TO LAW.[7]

Upon arraignment, appellant, assisted by his counsel, pleaded not guilty to both charges. The two criminal actions were jointly tried. In the course of the trial, the prosecution presented private complainant "AAA," Dr. Ronald Lim, and "BBB," complainant's mother. For its part, the defense presented the sole testimony of the appellant.

Evidence for the Prosecution

The pertinent facts are faithfully stated in the Decision of the appellate court, viz:

"AAA," the private complainant herein, testified that she was only eight (8) years old when her father, accused Florante started to rape her and continued sexually abusing her until January 9, 2003; that as a result of such abuse, she got pregnant and that despite knowledge of her pregnancy, the accused continued to have sexual intercourse with her. The witness further narrated that the sexual abuse began after her whole family, including her two sisters transferred from Manila to "CCC," "DDD," "EEE" and that the very first time she was sexually abused by her father was on the occasion when her mother was away vending vegetables. This sexual encounter was followed by countless instances, whenever her mother was not at home and vending vegetables, where she was sexually abused by her father at bolo-point and threats were made against her life and that of her family, as well, in order to prevent her from telling anyone about the incidents. As recounted by "AAA," such sexual abuse happened once a week, usually on a Thursday at around 7:00 o'clock in the evening when her mother was away spending the night with her aunt in "FFF," "EEE" which was nearer to the market. Such sexual abuses were done by her father at their house and usually in the room of her parents and also, sometimes in the room where she and her siblings sleep. In describing how her father sexually abused her, "AAA" stated that her father would mount x x x her and insert his penis into her vagina and do a push and pull movement and in three occasions, her father even turned her backwards against him.

x x x x

Despite her pregnancy, her father continued to have sexual intercourse with her until January 9, 2003 when her father left for Manila on January 11, 2003. On January 24, 2003, while her father was still in Manila, "AAA" finally had the courage to tell her mother about her sexual ordeals in the hands of her father. They went to the authorities to have [her] father arrested and there she executed a sworn statement about the rape incidents and likewise submitted herself to medical examination.

In this connection, Dr. Ronald Lim, the physician who examined "AAA" and who is the Municipal Health Officer of "DDD," "EEE" testified that on January 27, 2003, he conducted a physical examination of "AAA's" reproductive organ and found healed lacerations on the victim's genitalia indicating that a man had sexual intercourse with her. From the said examination, he also discovered that the victim was pregnant.

In the meantime, "BBB," the mother of private complainant, testified that she and accused Florante are the parents of "AAA." She related that on October 22, 1987, she and accused Florante were married and that on July 5, 1988, "AAA" was born from their union. She recalled that on January 24, 2003, "AAA" informed her that she had a problem and then proceeded to tell her that she was pregnant. When she asked who the father was, "AAA" replied that it was her own father, "BBB's" own husband who made her pregnant. The two of them then went to the police station to report the incident and to have Florante arrested and at the same time, have "AAA" medically examined. The witness stated that the result of the medical examination confirmed that "AAA" was indeed pregnant.

x x x x[8]

Evidence for the Appellant

During the trial, appellant initially denied that he raped "AAA" in August 2002. But during the presentation of the defense evidence, he admitted having sexual intercourse with "AAA" during that time. Appellant, however, stood pat in denying the accusation against him in Criminal Case No. 2003-5883, asserting in the main that he had

already left for Manila prior to the alleged rape on January 9, 2003.

Ruling of the Regional Trial Court

The trial court found the testimony of "AAA" in relating her horrible misfortune at the hands of her own father to be consistent and steadfast. It discredited appellant's defense of alibi holding that it cannot prevail over the positive testimony of "AAA." The dispositive portion of its Joint Decision reads:

WHEREFORE, finding the accused FLORANTE RELANES guilty of the crime of Rape beyond reasonable doubt in both Criminal Case Nos. 2003-5882 [and] 5883, the Court hereby sentences him to suffer the penalty of double death and to pay the victim ["AAA"] the civil indemnity in the amount of Php50,000.00, Php75,000.00 [as] moral damages and Php25,000.00 as exemplary damages in each case.

SO ORDERED.[9]

Ruling of the Court of Appeals

In a Decision dated March 17, 2006, the CA affirmed with modification the trial court's Joint Decision convicting appellant. Like the trial court, the CA also found the testimony of "AAA" clear, positive and consistent with the circumstances surrounding the rape incidents disposing as follows:

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the Joint Decision dated October 29, 2004 of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 51 of Sorsogon City, in Criminal Case Nos. 2003-5882 and 2003-5883 finding accused-appellant Florante Relanes alias "Dante" GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of qualified rape and imposing upon him the death penalty in both cases is AFFIRMED with MODIFICATION in that, accused-appellant is hereby ordered to pay "AAA" the following amounts, in each case: P75,000.00 as civil indemnity; P50,000.00 as moral damages and P25,000.00 as exemplary damages.

SO ORDERED.[10]

From the CA, the case was elevated to this Court for automatic review. In its Resolution[11] dated January 30, 2007, this Court required the parties to submit Supplemental Briefs within 30 days from notice thereof if they so desire.

In a Manifestation[12] filed on March 14, 2007, appellant manifested that he is no longer filing a Supplemental Brief but adopts his arguments in the Appellant's Brief[13] submitted before the CA. Appellee, for its part, manifested[14] that it is dispensing with the filing of a Supplemental Brief as the facts, issues and pertinent arguments have already been discussed in its Appellee's Brief[15] dated September 20, 2005. Hence, this case was submitted for deliberation on the basis of Appellant's Brief and Appellee's Brief filed with the CA.

Issues

In the Brief he filed with the CA, appellant raised the following assignment of errors:

- The trial court gravely erred in giving full weight and credence to the incredible testimony of the private complainant.
- The trial court gravely erred in convicting the accused-appellant of the crime charged despite the failure of [the] prosecution to prove his guilt beyond reasonable doubt.[16]

Our Ruling

We sustain the assailed Decision of the CA.

At the core of almost all rape cases, the credibility of the victim's testimony

is crucial in view of the intrinsic nature of the crime where only the participants therein can testify to its occurrence. In this regard, a restatement of a consistent ruling is in order. The rule is that "the findings of fact of trial court, its calibration of the testimonies of the witnesses and its assessment of the probative weight thereof, as well as its conclusions anchored on said findings, are accorded high respect if not conclusive effect." [17] This is especially true if such findings have been affirmed by the appellate court, thereby making such findings generally binding upon this Court.

We have thoroughly reviewed the records and found that indeed the prosecution has sufficiently and convincingly proved that appellant had carnal knowledge of "AAA" through force and intimidation sometime in August 2002 and on January 9, 2003. Records bear out the convincing manner in which "AAA" testified and did so with candor and consistency in recounting the material points of the criminal incidents. She vividly recounted the sexual ordeal that she suffered sometime in August 2002 at the hands of her father, thus:

xxxx

Q.

Why did you file a complaint against your father?

A.

I want him to pay [for] what he did to me.

The victim is crying, Your Honor.

Q.

Tell us, what did your father do to you?

A.

He raped me.

Q.

Where did that happen?

A.

In our house.

Q.

Where is that house?

A.

In "CCC."

Q.

When did it happen?

A.

The last time was on January 9, ma'am

Q.

What year?

A.

2003.

Q.

You said that the last time your father raped you was on January 9, 2003, it means that there were other times, am I right?

A.

Yes, ma'am.

Q.

When was the first time that he raped you?

A

When I was in grade 2, ma'am.

Q.

How old were you then?

A.

I was 8 years old.

Q.

And were you still living in "CCC" then?

A.

Yes, ma'am.

Q.

What about your mother, where was she when you were first raped by your father?

A.

She was out of the house vending.

Q.

What?

A.

Selling vegetables.

Q.

You were first raped when you were in grade 2, when else [was that] done to you?

A.

It was in [the] month of August.

Court (to witness)

Q.

August of what year?

A.

2002.

x x x x

Court: (to witness)

Q.

Whenever he raped you, what actually did your father do with your body?

A.

He used to [carry] me and he always [had] a bolo with him.

Pros. Gabito

Q.

And what does he tell you when he has that bolo?

A.

He told me that whenever I report the matter to everybody, he will kill us all.

Q.

After he tells you that, what did he do to you?

A.

He raped me.

Court (to witness)

Q.

What do you mean by rape, what does he do to you?

A.

He undressed me.

Q.

And when you [were] already naked, what [did] he do?

A.

He mounted x x x me.

Q.

And when he is on top of you, what else did he do?

A.

Whenever he went on top of me, he told me not to tell anybody or else I will be killed.

Q.

Is he naked while he is on top of you?

A.

Yes, ma'am.

Q.

And [when] he goes on top of you, what does he do x x x to you in your private parts?

A.

He raped me.

Q.

When you said [rape], what does he use to rape you?

A.

His penis.

Q.

What does he do with his penis?

A.

He inserted it to mine.

Q.

When you said mine, are you referring to your vagina?

A.

Yes, ma'am.

x x x x

Q.

And except from your description that he mounted x x x you, insert his penis [into] your vagina, did he do any other position or style to you?

A.

He let me [turn] my back [to him].

The witness broke into tears again and cried and may we ask for a recess.

Court Recess for five minutes.

Atty. Gabito

Q.

And when your back is already turned towards him[,] your back?

A.

Yes, ma'am.

Q.

And what does he do to you when your back is towards him and he is behind you?

A.

He inserted his penis.

Court (to witness)

Q.

When his penis is inside your vagina, what did he do?

A.

[He's] doing a push and pull movement.[18]

As to the alleged rape committed on January 9, 2003, "AAA" stated:

Q.

You said, the last time that your father had sexual intercourse was on January 9, that was two days before he left for Manila, am I right?

A.

Yes, ma'am.

Q.

Now, where did that last rape incident happen?

A.

In our house.

Q.

Who were there when that happened?

A.

Nobody, ma'am.

Q.

Only you and your father?

A.

Yes, ma'am.

Q.

Before he [raped] you, what were you doing?

A.

I was cleaning the house.

Q.

And what about your father, what was he doing then?

A.

Nothing, he was just there.

Q.

Where were your two sisters and your mother then?

A.

My other sister was in school while the other one was in my grandmother's house.

Q.

What about your mother?

A.

She was vending.

Q.

While you were cleaning the house, what did your father do?

A.

He let me go inside the bedroom.

Q.

And did you follow him, his instruction to go to that bedroom?

A.

It took me a long time before I went inside the room.

Q.

Why?

A.

I was afraid.

Q.

But did you eventually enter the room?

A.

Yes, ma'am.

Q.

Why?

A.

He threatened me.

Q.

And while you were already inside the bedroom, what did he do?

A.

He undressed me.

Q.

What about himself, what did he do?

A.

He also undressed himself.

Q.

Were you totally naked?

A.

Yes, ma'am.

Q.

What about him?

A.

He was also naked.

Q.

So after both of you [were already] naked, what else happened?

A.

He mounted x x x me.

Q.

Where were you lying then?

A.

[On] a bed.

Q.

After he mounted x x x you, what else did he do to his penis?

A.

He inserted his penis [into] my vagina.

Q.

And while his penis was inserted [into] your vagina, what [was] he doing?

A.

He was doing a push and pull movement.

Q.

After he was [through] doing that, what else happened?

A.

He ordered me to go on top of the divider of our house and he [told me to jump].

Q.

Why?

A.

Because he wanted to [terminate a pregnancy].[19]

Based on the foregoing narrations, bolstered by appellant's own admission that he raped "AAA" in August 2002, we find conclusive evidence that "AAA" was undoubtedly raped against her will with the use of force and intimidation, not once, but many times at the hands of her own father.

Moreover, "AAA's" testimony is corroborated by the findings of the examining physician, Dr. Ronald Lim.[20] The doctor found healed lacerations at 6, 11 and 2 o'clock positions on "AAA's" hymen which according to him could have been caused by sexual intercourse. "When a rape victim's account is straightforward and candid, and is corroborated by the medical findings of the examining physician, the same is sufficient to support a conviction for rape." [21]

"AAA" cried while recounting her awful experience at the hands of her own father so that the court had to order a brief recess for her to regain her composure.[22] Such display of emotion is a clear indication regarding the truth of the rape charges.[23] As has been repeatedly held, "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 [was] other than a fervent desire to seek justice." [24]

Appellant's belabored attempt to characterize the testimony of "AAA" as incredible lacks merit. His claim that it was not possible for him to rape "AAA" everytime her mother was in the market on Thursdays because she ("AAA") attended classes from Monday to Friday was completely debunked by the appellate court in this wise:

Accused-appellant's position that the testimony of the rape victim is too incredible to be believed owing to the fact that the January 9, 2003 rape incident could not have been committed as the rape victim herself admitted that she was in school "from Mondays to Fridays" and stayed there from morning until afternoon is untenable. First, such admission does not in any way contradict the victim's testimony of rape as it does not exclude the possibility that accused-appellant had sexual intercourse with her on the date in question. Second, "AAA" herself clarified during her cross-examination that the sexual abuse by accused-appellant usually happened on a Thursday around 7:00 o'clock in the evening, after classes in school, and on the occasion when her mother was not at home.[25]

Appellant's defense of denial and alibi should be dismissed outright in light of his positive identification by the victim "AAA." It is an established jurisprudential rule that denial and alibi, being negative self-serving defenses,

cannot prevail over the affirmative allegations of the victim and her categorical and positive identification of the accused as her assailant.[26] "Denial and alibi must be proved by the accused with clear and convincing evidence otherwise they cannot prevail over the positive testimony of credible witnesses who testify on affirmative matters." [27] The assertion of appellant that he was in Manila on January 9, 2003 does not inspire belief since it remained uncorroborated by clear and convincing evidence that he was really in Manila when the last rape was committed. But what sealed appellant's fate is his plea for forgiveness to his wife, daughter, his parents and members of his family.[28] "Evidently, no one would ask for forgiveness unless he had committed some wrong and a plea for forgiveness may be considered as analogous to an attempt to compromise." [29] Settled is the rule that in criminal cases, except those involving quasi-offenses or those allowed by law to be settled through mutual concessions, an offer of compromise by the accused may be received in evidence as an implied admission of guilt.[30] Under the circumstances obtaining, appellant's plea for forgiveness should be received as an implied admission of guilt.

With all the foregoing, this Court entertains no doubt that the prosecution had established beyond reasonable doubt that appellant raped his daughter "AAA" under the circumstances mentioned in Article 266-A, paragraph 1(a)[31] of the Revised Penal Code which, pursuant to Article 266-B[32] of the same Code, warrants the imposition of the death penalty. To justify the imposition of death penalty, however, it is required that the special qualifying circumstances of minority of the victim and her relationship to the appellant be properly alleged in the Information and duly proved during the trial. All these requirements were duly established in this case. In the two Informations, it was alleged that "AAA" was 13 years old and 14 years old when the incidents happened. "AAA's" minority was buttressed not only by her testimony during the trial but likewise by her Certificate of Live Birth showing that she was born on July 5, 1988.[33] Appellant categorically admitted that he was legally married to "AAA's" mother and that "AAA" is his daughter.[34] Thus, appellant was correctly sentenced to death in both cases by the courts below. However, since the imposition of the death penalty has been prohibited by Republic Act No. 9346,[35] the death penalty imposed on appellant is reduced to reclusion perpetua, without eligibility for parole.[36]

Regarding damages, we sustain the appellate court's award of civil indemnity to "AAA" in the amount of P75,000.00 for each case. "[I]f the crime of rape is qualified by circumstances which warrant the imposition of the death penalty by applicable amendatory laws, the complainant should be awarded P75,000.00 for each count of rape as civil indemnity." [37] We also affirm the award of moral and exemplary damages. In rape cases, "[m]oral damages are awarded to rape victims without need of proof other than the fact of rape under the assumption that the victim suffered moral injuries for the experience she underwent." [38] Exemplary damages, on the other hand, are given by way of public example and to protect the young from sexual abuse. However, the moral and exemplary damages in the amount of P50,000.00 and P25,000.00, respectively, should be increased to P75,000.00 and P30,000.00 consistent with relevant jurisprudence.[39] In addition, interest at the rate of six percent (6%) per annum shall be imposed on all damages awarded from the date of finality of this judgment, likewise pursuant to prevailing jurisprudence.[40]

WHEREFORE, the Decision of the Court of Appeals dated March 17, 2006 finding appellant Florante Relanes guilty beyond reasonable doubt of two counts of qualified rape is **AFFIRMED** with the **MODIFICATIONS** that: (1) the penalty of death imposed on appellant is reduced to reclusion perpetua without eligibility for parole pursuant to Republic Act No. 9346; and (2) the award of moral and exemplary damages are increased to P75,000.00 and P30,000.00, respectively, in each case. The award of civil indemnity in the amount of P75,000.00 for each case is maintained. Interest at the rate of six percent (6%) per annum is imposed on all the damages awarded in this case from date of finality of this judgment until fully paid.

SO ORDERED.

Corona, C.J., Carpio, Carpio Morales, Velasco, Jr., Nachura, Leonardo-De Castro, Brion, Peralta, Bersamin, Abad, Villarama, Jr., Perez, Mendoza, and Sereno, JJ., concur.

[1] *People v. Agustin*, G.R. No. 175325, February 27, 2008, 547 SCRA 136, 143.

[2] *People v. Baligod*, G.R. No. 172115, August 6, 2008, 561 SCRA 305, 311.

[3] CA rollo, pp. 66-78; penned by Associate Justice Rodrigo V. Cosico and concurred in by Associate Justices Regalado E. Maambong and Lucenito N. Tagle.

[4] Records, Vol. I, pp. 77-82.

[5] The identity of the victim or any information which could establish or compromise her identity, as well as those of her immediate family or household members, shall be withheld pursuant to Republic Act No. 7610, An Act Providing for Stronger Deterrence and Special Protection Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination, and for Other Purposes; Republic Act No. 9262, An Act Defining Violence Against Women and Their Children, Providing for Protective Measures for Victims, Prescribing Penalties Therefor, and for Other Purposes; and Section 40 of A.M. No. 04-10-11-SC, known as the Rule on Violence Against Women and Their Children, effective November 5, 2004.

[6] Records, Vol. I, p. 1.

[7] Records, Vol. II, p. 1.

[8] CA rollo, pp. 67-69.

[9] Records, Vol. I, p. 82; penned by Judge Jose L. Madrid.

[10] CA rollo, p. 77.

[11] Rollo, p. 15.

[12] *Id.* at 16-17.

[13] CA rollo, pp. 19-29.

[14] Rollo, unpagged.

[15] CA rollo, pp. 43-61.

[16] *Id.* at 21.

[17] *People v. Aguila*, G.R. No. 171017, December 6, 2006, 510 SCRA 642, 661.

[18] TSN, December 2, 2003, pp. 5-10.

[19] *Id.* at 15-17.

[20] Exhibit "A", Records, Vol. II, p. 8.

[21] *People v. Guambor*, 465 Phil. 671, 677 (2004), see *People v. Perez*, G.R. No. 182924, 575 SCRA 653, 672.

[22] TSN, December 2, 2003, p. 9.

[23] *People v. Crespo*, G.R. No. 180500, September 11, 2008, 564 SCRA 613, 638.

[24] *People v. Isang*, G.R. No. 183087, December 4, 2008, 573 SCRA 150, 161.

[25] CA rollo, p. 74.

[26] *People v. Nazareno*, G.R. No. 167756, April 9, 2008, 551 SCRA 16, 42.

[27] *People v. Guevarra*, G.R. No. 182192, October 29, 2008, 570 SCRA 288, 306.

[28] TSN, July 26, 2004, p. 9.

[29] *People v. Abadies*, 433 Phil. 814, 824 (2002).

[30] Rules of Court, Rule 130, Section 27.

[31] Article 266-A. Rape, When and How Committed. - Rape is committed -

1. By a man who shall have carnal knowledge of a woman under any of the following circumstances:

(a) Through force, threat or intimidation;

x x x x

[32] Article 266-B. Penalties - x x x

x x x x

The death penalty shall be imposed if the crime of rape is committed with any of the following circumstances:

1. When the victim is under eighteen (18) years of age and the offender is a parent, ascendant, step-parent, guardian, relative by consanguinity or affinity within the third civil degree, or the common law spouse of the parent of the victim.

x x x x

[33] Exhibits "B"; "B-1", Records, Vol. I, p. 42.

[34] TSN, July 26, 2004, p. 2.

[35] An Act Prohibiting The Imposition of Death Penalty in the Philippines.

[36] *People v. Baun*, G.R. No. 167503, August 20, 2008, 562 SCRA 584, 602.

[37] *People v. Tormis*, G.R. No. 183456, December 18, 2008, 574 SCRA 903, 919.

[38] *People v. Jacob*, G.R. No. 177151, August 22, 2008, 563 SCRA 191, 208.

[39] *People v. Rocabo*, G.R. No. 193482, March 2, 2011.

[40] *People v. Galvez*, G.R. No. 181827, February 2, 2011, *People v. Alverio*, G.R. No. 194259, March 16, 2011.

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