

ANTONIETA LUCIDO @ TONYAY, PETITIONER, VS. PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, RESPONDENT.

G.R. No. 217764. August 07, 2017

Ponente: LEONEN, J.

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LEONEN, J.:

This resolves a Petition for Review on Certiorari[2] assailing the Court of Appeals' Decision[3] dated August 28, 2014 and Resolution[4] dated March 13, 2015. The assailed Court of Appeals Decision affirmed with modification the Regional Trial Court Decision[5] dated June 27, 2011, while the assailed Resolution denied the Motion for Reconsideration.

The Regional Trial Court Decision found Antonieta Lucido (Lucido) guilty of child abuse under Section 10(a)[6] of Republic Act No. 7610 or the Special Protection of Children Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act.[7]

In the Information[8] dated March 30, 2008, Lucido was charged with child abuse under Section 10(a) of Republic Act No. 7610:

That on or about the month of December, 2007 in Brgy. Atabay, Hilongos, Leyte, within the jurisdiction of the Honorable Court, the above-named accused, did then and there, maliciously, willfully, unlawfully, and intentionally, beat with the use of a belt, pinched, and strangled the child victim [AAA], who was then eight (8) years old, thereby inflicting physical injuries that affected the normal development of the said child victim.

CONTRARY TO LAW.[9]

Lucido pleaded not guilty upon arraignment.[10]

On August 10, 2008, the pre-trial was held. Lucido, through counsel, offered to plead guilty to the crime of Less Serious Physical Injuries under Article 265 of the Revised Penal Code or Violation of Article 59, paragraph 8 of Presidential Decree No. 603[11] or the Child and Youth Welfare Code. However, it was not accepted by the complaining witnesses and the prosecution. Thereafter, trial on the merits ensued.[12]

On July 1, 2009, Lucido was released on bail.[13]

The prosecution presented the following as witnesses: the victim AAA, Dr. Conrado Abiera III (Dr. Abiera), the father of the victim FFF, and Maria Hinampas (Hinampas).[14] The prosecution established the following facts:

Sometime in August 2007, in Barangay Atabay, Hilongos, Leyte, AAA was placed by her parents in the custody of their neighbor Lucido, alias Tony ay.[15] The arrangement was made upon the request of Lucido that AAA stay with her since she was living alone.[16] AAA was eight (8) years old at that time.[17]

During AAA's stay with Lucido, the child suffered repeated physical abuse in the latter's hands, which included strangulation,[18] beating,[19] pinching,[20] and touching of her sex organ by Lucido.[21] AAA was also threatened by Lucido that she would be stabbed if she tells anyone about what was being done to her.[22]

One of Lucido's neighbors, Hinampas, noticed the abrasions on AAA's neck and observed that she was limping as she walked.[23] The child then related that she was choked and beaten on her leg by Lucido.[24] AAA's parents learned of her plight,[25] prompting FFF to go to Lucido's residence and take AAA back with the help of a barangay tanod.[26]

A subsequent physical examination conducted by Dr. Abiera of Hilongos District Hospital confirmed AAA's story. His findings were as follows:

Multiple abrasions on different parts of the body secondary to pricking
nail marks/scratches
There is redness on the peripheral circumference of the hymen
No hymenal laceration noted.
There is weakness of (L) knee joint upon walking.[27]

After the prosecution rested its case, the defense presented Lucido, Lucia Mancio Lusuegro (Lusuegro), and Estrella L. Sanchez (Sanchez) as witnesses.[28] The Court of Appeals summarized their testimonies as follows:

[Lucido] denied that she pinched, beat and hit AAA and that she inserted her finger into AAA's vagina. She claimed that she usually cleaned AAA's vagina and bathed her with hot water. She, likewise, denied that she brought AAA to Bato for sexual intercourse. [Lucido] impute[d] ill motive on Hinampas, whom she claimed to be her enemy, in instituting the complaint against her.

Lucia Mancio Lusuegro ... a neighbor of [Lucido] and AAA's parents at Brgy. Atabay, Hilongos, Leyte, testified that she heard AAA cry only once outside the house of [Lucido]. She never heard any commotion that [Lucido] maltreated AAA.

Estrella Sanchez ... testified that the accusation of child abuse and prostitution was not true. She claimed that the filing of the case against [Lucido] was instigated by Hinampas, with whom [Lucido] had a quarrel.[29]

On June 27, 2011, the Regional Trial Court rendered a Decision, convicting Lucido of child abuse, as follows:

WHEREFORE, in view of the foregoing, accused ANTONIETA LUCIDO alyas "Tonyay" is found GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt in violation of Section 10 (a) of Republic Act No. 7610 and hereby sentenced to suffer the penalty of Prison Mayor in its minimum period (SIX (6) YEARS and ONE (1) DAY to EIGHT (8) YEARS imprisonment), and to pay the offended party [AAA] Fifty Thousand Pesos (P50,000.00) as moral damages.

SO ORDERED.[30]

The Court of Appeals affirmed Lucido's conviction, but modified the penalty imposed by applying the Indeterminate Sentence Law. The dispositive portion of the Decision read:

WHEREFORE, the Appeal is DENIED. The Decision, dated 27 June 2011, of the Regional Trial Court of Hilongos[,] Leyte, 8[th] Judicial Region, Branch 18 in Criminal Case No. H-1675 is hereby AFFIRMED with MODIFICATIONS, to wit:

- (a) the appellant Antonieta Lucido @ "Tonyay" is hereby sentenced to four (4) years, nine (9) months and eleven (11) days of prison correccional, as minimum, to six (6) years, eight (8) months and one (1) day of prison mayor, as maximum;
- (b) an interest at the rate of six percent (6%) per annum shall be applied to the award of moral damages to be reckoned from this date until fully paid;
- (c) the bondsman is ordered to surrender the appellant to the court a quo, within ten (10) days from notice and to report to this Court the fact of surrender, within ten (10) days from notice of such fact;

(d) in case of non-surrender, the Regional Trial Court of Hilongos[,] Leyte, 8[th] Judicial Region, Branch 18 is DIRECTED to:

- (i) cancel the bond posted for the provisional liberty of the appellant;
- (ii) order the arrest of the appellant; and
- (iii) immediately commit the appellant to the Bureau of Prisons.

SO ORDERED.[31]

Lucido's Motion for Reconsideration was likewise denied in the Court of Appeals March 13, 2015 Resolution.

Hence, this Petition[32] was filed on May 20, 2015. This Court received respondent's Comment[33] on November 23, 2015.

Petitioner raises the following issues for this Court's resolution:

1. whether the Court of Appeals erred in sustaining her conviction despite the failure of the prosecution to prove her guilt beyond reasonable doubt; and
2. whether the Court of Appeals erred in not finding that the crime committed was only slight physical injuries and not a violation of Republic Act No. 7610.[34]

Petitioner contends that the prosecution failed to prove "that the physical injuries inflicted on the child had prejudiced the child's development so as to debase, degrade or demean the intrinsic worth and dignity of the child as a human being." She cites the absence of an expert opinion validating scientifically that the acts complained of proximately caused the "prejudice inflicted upon the child's development." [35]

Furthermore, petitioner argues that the prosecution was not able to prove the infliction of physical injuries on the child. She avers that Hinampas' testimony of having heard the victim being maltreated several times by Lucido is incredible, exaggerated, and unworthy of belief. First, the victim's own father, whose house was about five (5) meters away from Lucido's house, never testified that he heard the maltreatment done by Lucido upon his own daughter.[36] Second, two (2) defense witnesses who were neighbors of Lucido testified that they did not hear any noise that would indicate Lucido's maltreatment of AAA.[37]

Petitioner claims that the charge against her was ill-motivated. She highlights the ongoing enmity between her and Hinampas, one (1) of the witnesses for the prosecution. Petitioner also imputes ill-motive on AAA in falsely testifying against her after having been scolded for damaging petitioner's cellphone.[38]

Finally, petitioner asserts that the prosecution failed to prove that the acts alleged in the information—beating using a belt, pinching, and strangulating AAA—were intended to "debase, degrade or demean the intrinsic worth and dignity of the child as a human being." [39] Citing *Bongalon v. People*, [40] petitioner contends that she could not be convicted of child abuse but only of slight physical injuries defined and punished under the Revised Penal Code.[41]

On the other hand, respondent argues that the petition must be denied because it raises questions of fact, which could not be done in a petition for review under Rule 45.[42]

This Court denies the petition.

I

The issues submitted by petitioner—the prosecution's failure to prove that the abuse suffered by the victim had prejudiced her normal development and want of credibility of the prosecution witnesses—are fundamentally factual. However, this Court is not a trier of facts. As a rule, "only questions of law may be raised in a petition for review on certiorari under Rule 45." [43]

It is not the function of this Court to review and weigh anew the evidence already passed upon by the Regional Trial Court and the Court of Appeals absent any showing of arbitrariness, capriciousness, or palpable error. [44] Petitioner did not present any substantive or compelling reason for this Court to apply the exception in this case.

Even if this Court disregards this infirmity, the petition still fails to impress. This Court finds no reversible error in the Court of Appeals Decision affirming petitioner's conviction for child abuse.

It is a fact that when the incident happened, the victim was a child entitled to the protection extended by Republic Act No. 7610, as mandated by the Constitution. [45] Thus, petitioner was properly charged and found guilty of violating Article VI, Section 10(a) of Republic Act No. 7610, which reads:

ARTICLE VI
OTHER ACTS OF ABUSE

Section 10. Other Acts of Neglect, Abuse, Cruelty or Exploitation and Other Conditions Prejudicial to the Child's Development.

(a)

Any person who shall commit any other acts of child abuse, cruelty or exploitation or be responsible for other conditions prejudicial to the child's development including those covered by Article 59 of Presidential Decree No. 603, as amended, but not covered by the Revised Penal Code, as amended, shall suffer the penalty of prision mayor in its minimum period. (Emphasis supplied)

Article I, Section 3(b) of Republic Act No. 7610 defines child abuse as the maltreatment of a child, whether habitual or not, including any of the following:

(1)

Psychological and physical abuse, neglect, cruelty, sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment;

(2)

Any act by deeds or words which debases, degrades or demeans the intrinsic worth and dignity of a child as a human being;

(3)

Unreasonable deprivation of his basic needs for survival, such as food and shelter; or

(4)

Failure to immediately give medical treatment to an injured child resulting in serious impairment of his growth and development or in his permanent incapacity or death. (Emphasis supplied)

As defined in the law, child abuse includes physical abuse of the child, whether it is habitual or not. Petitioner's acts fall squarely within this definition.

AAA testified on the physical abuse she suffered in the hands of petitioner. The Regional Trial Court described her narration of the facts to be in "a straightforward, credible and spontaneous manner which could not be defeated by the denial of the accused." [46] From the appearance of the victim, the trial court likewise observed physical evidence of the abuses and ill-treatment inflicted by the petitioner on AAA aside from the victim's psychological displacement. [47] AAA's testimony was further corroborated by Dr. Abierra, who noted several observations during his physical examination of the victim. First, there were "multiple abrasions on different parts of [AAA's] body." [48] Additionally, he observed a "redness on the peripheral circumference of the hymen," which could have been caused by a hard pinching. [49] Finally, there was an evident "weakness on the left knee joint," which could have been caused by the victim falling to the ground or being beaten by a hard object. [50]

Petitioner's bare imputations of ill motive on Hinampas and AAA deserve scant consideration. This defense had been judiciously taken into account and rejected by the trial court, in light of the clear, consistent, and positive testimonies of AAA, Dr. Abierra, and FFF. As aptly observed by the trial court, Hinampas "ha[d] no control over the intelligence and will of the victim and the parents in testifying against [petitioner]." [51] A child witness like AAA, who spoke in a clear, positive, and convincing manner and remained consistent on cross-examination, is a credible witness. [52] Motive becomes inconsequential when there is a categorical declaration from the victim, which establishes the liability of the accused. [53]

Moreover, the inconsistencies relied upon by petitioner are trivial and do not minimize the value of the prosecution witnesses' testimonies. The fact that the victim's father did not mention in his testimony that he had heard any sound that would indicate Lucido's maltreatment of his daughter does not render impossible the positive declaration of the victim as to the abuses she suffered. On the other hand, defense witness Sanchez's testimony is hardly credible because she was no longer residing in Brgy. Atabay in 2007, when AAA was living with Lucido. [54] Further, contrary to petitioner's assertion, the other defense witness, Lusuegro, testified that she heard AAA cry when the latter was staying with Lucido. [55]

Indeed, the trial court's assessment on the trustworthiness of AAA and Hinampas will not be disturbed, absent any facts or circumstances of real weight which might have been overlooked, misappreciated, or misunderstood. [56] Through its firsthand observations during the entire proceedings, the trial court can be expected to determine, with reasonable discretion, whose testimony to accept and which witness to believe. [57]

II

Petitioner further insists that the prosecution failed to prove that the acts complained of were prejudicial to the victim's development.

This Court disagrees.

Section 10(a) of Republic Act No. 7610 punishes four (4) distinct offenses, i.e. (a) child abuse, (b) child cruelty, (c) child exploitation, and (d) being responsible for conditions prejudicial to the child's development. [58] As correctly ruled by the Court of Appeals, the element that the acts must be prejudicial to the child's development pertains only to the fourth offense. Thus:

Instructive is *Araneta v. People* which held, viz:

As gleaned from the foregoing, the provision punishes not only those enumerated under Article 59 of Presidential Decree No. 603, but also four distinct acts, i.e., (a) child abuse, (b) child cruelty, (c) child exploitation and (d) being responsible for conditions prejudicial to the child's development. The Rules and Regulations of the questioned statute distinctly and separately defined child abuse, cruelty and exploitation just to show that these three acts are different from one another and from the act prejudicial to the child's development. Contrary to petitioner's assertion, an accused can be prosecuted and be convicted under Section

10(a), Article VI of Republic Act No. 7610 if he commits any of the four acts therein. The prosecution need not prove that the acts of child abuse, child cruelty and child exploitation have resulted in the prejudice of the child because an act prejudicial to the development of the child is different from the former acts.

Moreover, it is a rule in statutory construction that the word "or" is a disjunctive term signifying dissociation and independence of one thing from other things enumerated. It should, as a rule, be construed in the sense which it ordinarily implies. Hence, the use of "or" in Section 10(a) of Republic Act No. 7610 before the phrase "be responsible for other conditions prejudicial to the child's development" supposes that there are four punishable acts therein. First, the act of child abuse; second, child cruelty; third, child exploitation; and fourth, being responsible for conditions prejudicial to the child's development. The fourth penalized act cannot be interpreted, as petitioner suggests, as a qualifying condition for the three other acts, because an analysis of the entire context of the questioned provision does not warrant such construal.

Contrary to the proposition of the appellant, the prosecution need not prove that the acts of child abuse, child cruelty and child exploitation have resulted in the prejudice of the child because an act prejudicial to the development of the child is different from the former acts. The element of resulting prejudice to the child's development cannot be interpreted as a qualifying condition to the other acts of child abuse, child cruelty and child exploitation.[59] (Emphasis in the original, citations omitted)

Strangling, severely pinching, and beating an eight (8)-year-old child to cause her to limp are intrinsically cruel and excessive. These acts of abuse impair the child's dignity and worth as a human being and infringe upon her right to grow up in a safe, wholesome, and harmonious place. It is not difficult to perceive that this experience of repeated physical abuse from petitioner would prejudice the child's social, moral, and emotional development.

Petitioner's contention that she should only be convicted for slight physical injuries in light of the ruling in *Bongalon v. People*,[60] is likewise untenable.

The facts in *Bongalon* are markedly different from this case. In *Bongalon*, a father was overwhelmed by his parental concern for the personal safety of his own minor daughters who had just suffered harm at the hands of the minor complainant and hit the minor complainant's back with his hand and slapped his left cheek.[61]

Here, AAA was maltreated by petitioner through repeated acts of strangulation, pinching, and beating. These are clearly extreme measures of punishment not commensurate with the discipline of an eight (8)-year-old child. Discipline is a loving response that seeks the positive welfare of a child. Petitioner's actions are diametrically opposite. They are abusive, causing not only physical injuries as evidenced by the physical marks on different parts of AAA's body and the weakness of her left knee upon walking, but also emotional trauma on her.

Republic Act No. 7610 is a measure geared to provide a strong deterrence against child abuse and exploitation and to give a special protection to children from all forms of neglect, abuse, cruelty, exploitation, and other conditions prejudicial to their development.[62] It must be stressed that the crime under Republic Act No. 7610 is *malum prohibitum*. [63] Hence, the intent to debase, degrade, or demean the minor is not the defining mark. Any act of punishment that debases, degrades, and demeans the intrinsic worth and dignity of a child constitutes the offense.

WHEREFORE, the Petition is DENIED. The August 28, 2014 Decision and March 13, 2015 Resolution of the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. CEB CR No. 01911 are hereby AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.

Carpio, (Chairperson), Peralta, Mendoza, and Martires, JJ., concur.

[1] "Lucedo" in other parts of the Rollo, CA rollo, and RTC records.

[2] Rollo, pp. 10-32.

[3] Id. at 34-47. The Decision, docketed as CA-G.R. CEB CR No. 01911, was penned by Associate Justice Renato C. Francisco and concurred in by Associate Justices Gabriel T. Ingles and Pamela Ann A. Maxino of the Eighteenth Division, Court of Appeals, Cebu City.

[4] Id. at 49-52. The Resolution was penned by Associate Justice Renato C. Francisco and concurred in by Associate Justices Gabriel T. Ingles and Pamela Ann A. Maxino of the Former Eighteenth Division, Court of Appeals, Cebu City.

[5] Id. at 53-58. The Decision, docketed as Crim. Case No. H-1675, was penned by Judge Ephrem S. Abando of Branch 18, Regional Trial Court, Hilongos, Leyte.

[6] Rep. Act No. 7610, sec. 10(a) provides:

Section 10. Other Acts of Neglect, Abuse, Cruelty or Exploitation and Other Conditions Prejudicial to the Child's Development. —

(a) Any person who shall commit any other acts of child abuse, cruelty or exploitation or be responsible for other conditions prejudicial to the child's development including those covered by Article 59 of Presidential Decree No. 603, as amended, but not covered by the Revised Penal Code, as amended, shall suffer the penalty of prison mayor in its minimum period.

[7] Rollo, p. 58.

[8] RTC records, p. 19.

[9] Id.

[10] CA rollo, p. 78.

[11] Pres. Decree No. 603, art. 59 provides:

Article 59. Crimes. — Criminal liability shall attach to any parent who:

(1) Conceals or abandons the child with intent to make such child lose his civil status.

(2) Abandons the child under such circumstances as to deprive him of the love, care and protection he needs.

(3) Sells or abandons the child to another person for valuable consideration.

(4) Neglects the child by not giving him the education which the family's station in life and financial conditions permit.

(5) Fails or refuses, without justifiable grounds, to enroll the child as required by Article 72.

(6) Causes, abates, or permits the truancy of the child from the school where he is enrolled. "Truancy" as here used means absence without cause for more than twenty schooldays, not necessarily consecutive.

It shall be the duty of the teacher in charge to report to the parents the absences of the child the moment these exceed five schooldays.

(7) Improperly exploits the child by using him, directly or indirectly, such as for purposes of begging and other acts which are inimical to his interest and welfare.

(8) Inflicts cruel and unusual punishment upon the child or deliberately subjects him to indignities and other excessive chastisement that embarrass or humiliate him.

(9) Causes or encourages the child to lead an immoral or dissolute life.

(10) Permits the child to possess, handle or carry a deadly weapon, regardless of its ownership.

(11) Allows or requires the child to drive without a license or with a license which the parent knows to have been illegally procured. If the motor vehicle driven by the child belongs to the parent, it shall be presumed that he permitted or ordered the child to drive.

"Parents" as here used shall include the guardian and the head of the institution or foster home which has custody of the child. (Emphasis supplied)

[12] CA rollo, p. 78.

[13] Id.

[14] Rollo, p. 35.

[15] TSN dated October 6, 2009, p. 6.

[16] Id.

[17] TSN dated January 5, 2010, pp. 14-15; RTC records, p. 12, AAA's Birth Certificate showed that she was born on August 6, 1999.

[18] TSN dated November 27, 2008, p. 5; TSN dated May 26, 2009, p. 4.

[19] Id. at 6.

[20] Id.

[21] Id. at 8.

[22] TSN dated May 26, 2009, pp. 7-8.

[23] TSN dated January 5, 2010, p. 5.

[24] Id.

[25] TSN dated, October 6, 2009, p. 14.

[26] Id. at 9.

[27] RTC records, p. 10, Medical Certificate dated January 2, 2008.

[28] Rollo, pp. 56-60.

[29] Id. at 37.

[30] Id. at 58.

[31] Id. at 46.

[32] Id. at 10-32.

[33] Id. at 118-134.

[34] Id. at 19.

[35] Id. at 21.

[36] Id. at 22.

[37] Id. at 22-23.

[38] Id. at 23.

[39] Id. at 25.

[40] 707 Phil. 11 (2013) [Per J. Bersamin, First Division].

[41] Rollo, pp. 24-25.

[42] Id. at 124.

[43] Torres v. People, G.R. No. 206627, January 18, 2017 <<http://sc.judiciary.gov.ph/pdf/web/viewer.html?file=/jurisprudence/2017/january2017/206627.pdf>> 5 [Per J. Leonen, Second Division].

[44] Torres v. People, G.R. No. 206627, January 18, 2017 <<http://sc.judiciary.gov.ph/pdf/web/viewer.html?file=/jurisprudence/2017/january2017/206627.pdf>> 6 [Per J. Leonen, Second Division],

[45] CONST., art. XV, sec. 3, par. 2 provides:

Section 3. The State shall defend:

....

(2) The right of children to assistance, including proper care and nutrition, and special protection from all forms of neglect, abuse, cruelty, exploitation, and other conditions prejudicial to their development[.]

[46] Rollo, p. 58.

[47] Id.

[48] TSN dated July 28, 2009, p. 7.

[49] Id. at 9.

[50] Id. at 9-10.

[51] Rollo, p. 58.

[52] People v. Reyes, 549 Phil. 655, 662 (2007) [Per J. Quisumbing, En Banc]; People v. Rama, 403 Phil. 155, 171-172 (2001) [Per J. Puno, First Division].

[53] People v. Lawa, AAA Phil. 191, 204 (2003) [Per Curiam, En Banc]; People v. Optana, 404 Phil. 316, 348 (2001) [Per J. Kapunan, First Division].

[54] TSN dated September 7, 2010, p. 8.

[55] TSN dated January 11, 2011, pp. 5-6 and 9.

[56] *Sanchez v. People*, 606 Phil. 762, 779 (2009) [Per J. Nachura, Third Division].

[57] *People v. Diu*, 708 Phil. 218, 232 (2013) [First Division, per J. Leonardo-De Castro]; *People v. Nelmda*, 694 Phil. 529, 556 (2012) [En Banc, per J. Perez]; *Magno v. People*, 516 Phil. 72, 81 (2006) [Per J. Garcia, Second Division].

[58] *Araneta v. People*, 578 Phil. 876, 883 (2008) [Per J. Chico Nazario, Third Division].

[59] *Rollo*, pp. 39-40.

[60] 707 Phil. 11 (2013) [Per J. Bersamin, First Division].

[61] *Id.* at 14-15.

[62] *Araneta v. People*, 578 Phil. 876, 883 (2008) [Per J. Chico Nazario, Third Division].

[63] See *Malto v. People*, 560 Phil. 119, 139 (2007) [Per J. Corona, First Division].

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