

**NEIL JOHN CEBALLOS Y TABLATE ALIAS
“JAYCEE-DEE” AND BENJIE BALASTON Y FRANCISCO,
PETITIONERS, VS. PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, RESPONDENT.**

G.R. No. 265220, April 21, 2026

Ponente: VILLANUEVA, J.

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VILLANUEVA, J.:

This Court resolves the Petition for Review on Certiorari[1] dated March 7, 2023, filed by petitioners Neil John Ceballos y Tablate alias "Jaycee Dee" (Ceballos)[2] and Benjie Balaston y Francisco (Balaston), which seeks to reverse and set aside the Court of Appeals (CA) Decision[3] and Resolution[4] that affirmed with modification the Family Court (FC) Decision,[5] finding Ceballos guilty of three counts and Balaston guilty of two counts of violation of Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610,[6] or the Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act, respectively.

Moreover, Balaston was found guilty of one count of acts of lasciviousness under Article 336 of Act No. 3815,[7] as amended by Republic Act No. 7610. Both Ceballos and Balaston were ordered to pay civil indemnity, moral damages, and exemplary damages for each of the crimes charged. The CA modified and increased the amount of the civil liability imposed.[8]

Antecedents

Ceballos and Balaston were charged with violation of qualified trafficking in persons in an Information[9] dated May 10, 2018.[10] The accusatory Information states:

That on or about the period from January to May 4, 2018, in the ,[11] Province of Laguna and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, conspiring and confederating, did then and there willfully, unlawfully[,] and feloniously maintain and hire the 12[-]year[-]old minor AAA,[12] the 11[-]year[-]old BBB[13] and the 13[-]year[-]old CCC[14] to engage in prostitution by repeatedly fellating the said minors and giving them monetary considerations to do the sexual acts, to the damage and prejudice of the said minor victims.[15] (Emphasis in the original)

During the arraignment on June 6, 2018, Ceballos and Balaston both pleaded not guilty to the charges filed against them.[16]

Thereafter, pre-trial commenced and the parties stipulated on (1) the jurisdiction of the FC; (2) the identity of Ceballos and Balaston as the persons charged in the Information; and (3) the minority of the victims. Thus, trial on the merits ensued.[17]

Version of the Prosecution

The prosecution presented four witnesses, namely: AAA;[18] BBB;[19] CCC;[20] and DDD,[21] the father of BBB and CCC. When the incidents occurred, AAA was 12 years old, BBB was 11 years old, and CCC was 13 years old.[22]

AAA testified that he met Ceballos in January 2018 when the latter bought him food from a convenience store and paid his rental fee at the computer shop. Ceballos then added AAA on his Facebook account, where they exchanged messages.[23]

On February 2, 2018, Ceballos invited AAA to meet again at the computer shop. AAA, BBB, and CCC all went to the computer shop. Ceballos, Balaston, and another individual named Chloe[24] were there. Ceballos then invited AAA, BBB, and CCC to go to a house the victims referred to as "sirang bahay." [25]

Ceballos and AAA then went inside the said house. It was at this point that Ceballos touched AAA's penis and stripped him of his undergarments. Ceballos also inserted AAA's penis into his mouth and fellated AAA. Thereafter, Ceballos gave AAA PHP 700.00.[26]

For his part, Balaston invited CCC inside the sirang bahay. Here, Balaston touched CCC's penis and removed his undergarments. Balaston then kneeled in front of CCC and fellated him. In consideration of the sexual act, Balaston gave CCC PHP 200.00. Balaston also invited BBB and did to the latter what he did to CCC.[27]

On February 6, 2018, AAA saw Ceballos in Cyber Craft, a different computer shop. Ceballos and AAA then proceeded to the sirang bahay. Ceballos and AAA stayed outside the sirang bahay and sat on a big rock, where Ceballos asked AAA to be his "jowa," which AAA refused. Again, Ceballos performed fellatio on AAA and gave him PHP 700.00. Since then, Ceballos, Balaston, and the victims met regularly, almost every week or every three or four days at the sirang bahay.[28]

On May 3, 2018, AAA, BBB, and CCC again met with Ceballos and Balaston at the sirang bahay. Balaston invited BBB and then CCC inside the sirang bahay while Ceballos and AAA stayed outside.[29]

While inside the sirang bahay, Balaston touched CCC's penis and put it inside his mouth. After committing such acts, Balaston and CCC went outside the sirang bahay. Thereafter, Balaston called BBB to enter. Balaston also performed fellatio on BBB until the latter ejaculated. Balaston then gave BBB and CCC PHP 200.00 each.[30]

At about 1:00 a.m. on May 4, 2018, while AAA was sitting on a rock outside the sirang bahay, Ceballos removed his undergarments and inserted AAA's penis in his mouth. Thereafter, Ceballos gave him PHP 1,500.00.[31]

On the same day, at around 4:00 a.m., AAA, BBB, and CCC went to AAA's house. DDD, BBB and CCC's father, who was looking for his children, went to AAA's house and saw the victims sleeping with their friend, EEE. EEE revealed to DDD that the victims had been going to the sirang bahay and that Ceballos and Balaston had been molesting them. DDD woke his children and asked if what EEE told him was true. BBB and CCC admitted that Ceballos and Balaston had committed acts of sexual abuse against them. Subsequently, DDD reported the matter to the barangay hall.[32]

At around 6:00 p.m. on the same day, Ceballos sent AAA a Facebook message, asking to meet up. EEE informed DDD of the impending meet-up between Ceballos, Balaston, and the victims. DDD and EEE went to the place where the victims were, and the victims identified Ceballos and Balaston, who were waiting at a shed.[33]

DDD then confronted Ceballos and Balaston. Thereafter, DDD, EEE, AAA, BBB, CCC, Ceballos, and Balaston went to the barangay hall, where the victims confirmed Ceballos and Balaston's identities as the persons who sexually abused them.[34]

Version of the Defense

Ceballos and Balaston denied the allegations. They claim that on May 3 and 4, 2018, they were at Balaston's house watching television with their friend, Chloe. Ceballos added that he was sick on May 3, 2018, and spent his rest day at Balaston's house.[35]

On May 4, 2018, Ceballos, accompanied by Balaston, went to the hospital to acquire a medical certificate to substantiate his claim of fit to return to work.[36]

On their way to the hospital, Ceballos and Balaston stated that a man riding a tricycle—later identified as DDD—had approached them. They ignored DDD, but he insisted they board the tricycle with him. They rode the tricycle out of fear since DDD made a hand motion as if he was pulling something from his chest.[37]

Ceballos and Balaston were then brought to the barangay hall, where they were questioned regarding the reason the minors had been coming home late. They denied the allegations against them but did not deny that they had met the minors in the past. Balaston stated that they were acquaintances, not friends, and that they only saw each other at the computer shop.[38]

Ruling of the FC

The dispositive portion of the Decision dated July 31, 2019, reads as follows:

WHEREFORE, in view of the foregoing, the accused[:]

NEIL JOHN CEBALLOS y TABLATE is found guilty of three (3) counts of violation of Section 5 (b) of Article III of the Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act and is hereby sentenced for each count an indeterminate period of 12 years and one day of reclusion temporal as minimum and [20] years of reclusion temporal as maximum;

[H]e is likewise ordered for each count to pay the minor victim, AAA, the amounts of [PHP] 20,000.00 as civil indemnity, [PHP] 15,000.00 as moral damages, [PHP] 15,000.00 as exemplary damages, and [PHP] 15,000.00 as fine, all of which shall earn interest at the rate of six percent (6%) per annum from the date of finality of this judgment;

[A]nd BENJIE BALASTON y FRANCISCO TABLATE [sic] is found guilty of two (2) counts of violation of Section 5 (b) of Article III of the Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act and is hereby sentenced for each count an indeterminate period of 12 years and one day of reclusion temporal as minimum and [20] years of reclusion temporal as maximum;

[H]e is likewise ordered for each count to pay the minor victim, CCC, the amounts of [PHP] 20,000.00 as civil indemnity, [PHP] 15,000.00 as moral damages, [PHP] 15,000.00 as exemplary damages, and [PHP] 15,000.00 as fine, all of which shall earn interest at the rate of [6%] per annum from the date of finality of this judgment;

[H]e is also found guilty of one count committing act of lasciviousness of under Article 336 of Act No. 3815, as amended, the Revised Penal Code in relation to Section 5(b) of Article III of the Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act and is hereby sentenced to an indeterminate period of [12] years and one day of reclusion temporal as minimum and [16] years, five months, and nine days of the medium period of reclusion temporal in its medium period as maximum;

[And] for this last offense, he is likewise ordered to pay the minor victim, BBB, the amounts of [PHP] 20,000.00 as civil indemnity, [PHP] 15,000.00 as moral damages, [PHP] 15,000.00 as exemplary damages, and [PHP] 15,000.00 as fine, all of which shall earn interest at the rate of [6%] per annum from the date of finality of this judgment.

SO ORDERED.[39] (Emphasis in the original)

The FC found that the prosecution established beyond reasonable doubt that Ceballos and Balaston were guilty of the crimes charged. Their bare denials cannot trump the clear testimonies of the victims.[40]

Additionally, the FC determined that although the Information appeared to charge more than one offense against

each accused—a ground for a motion to quash—Ceballos and Balaston's failure to object thereto constituted a waiver.[41]

While the FC recognized that the Information charged Ceballos and Balaston with qualified trafficking in persons, in violation of Section 4(a) in relation to Sections 6(a)(c) and 10(e) of Republic Act No. 9208,[42] or the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003 as amended by Republic Act No. 10364,[43] or the Expanded Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2012, the FC found it proper to hold Ceballos and Balaston guilty of violations of Republic Act No. 7610 given that the victims were not recruited for trading or delivering the individual to another. The FC held that the sexual abuse was committed for personal carnal satisfaction. Thus, the FC found it proper to hold Ceballos and Balaston liable for violations of Republic Act No. 7610, rather than Republic Act No. 9208.[44]

Thereafter, Ceballos and Balaston filed a Notice of Appeal to the CA dated August 2, 2019. The Brief for the Accused-Appellants dated February 7, 2020[45] argues that the FC erred (1) in convicting Ceballos and Balaston for violations of Republic Act No. 7610 when they were charged and tried for qualified trafficking, thus denying them of their constitutional rights to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation against them; (2) in convicting Ceballos and Balaston despite the defective Information; and (3) in giving credence to the inconsistent statements of AAA, BBB, and CCC.[46]

The respondent People of the Philippines (People), through the Office of the Solicitor General, filed its Brief for the Plaintiff-Appellee dated June 30, 2020[47] maintaining that the FC did not err in convicting Ceballos and Balaston given that the Information clearly alleged the violation of the crimes charged and that the testimonies of the victims were credible.[48]

CA Ruling

The CA rendered a Decision dated February 28, 2022 denying the appeal filed by Ceballos and Balaston, but modifying the civil liability imposed by the FC and removing the legal interest of the fine imposed by the FC. The dispositive portion of the Decision reads as follows:

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the instant appeal is DENIED. The assailed Decision dated July 31, 2019 rendered by , Regional Trial Court (RTC) of in Criminal Case No. 31378-2018-C is AFFIRMED with MODIFICATION with regard to the amounts of civil liability imposed. Accused-appellant Neil John Ceballos y Tablate alias "Jaycee Dee" is DIRECTED to pay AAA the amounts of [PHP] 50,000.00 as civil indemnity, [PHP] 50,000.00 as moral damages, and [PHP] 50,000.00 as exemplary damages for each count of violation of Section 5(b), Article III of [Republic Act No.] 7610. Meanwhile, accused-appellant Benjie Balaston y Francisco is DIRECTED to pay CCC the amounts of [PHP] 50,000.00 as civil indemnity, [PHP] 50,000.00 as moral damages, and [PHP] 50,000.00 as exemplary damages for each count of violation of Section 5(b), Article III of [Republic Act No.] 7610, and to pay BBB the amounts of [PHP] 50,000.00 as civil indemnity, [PHP] 50,000.00 as moral damages, and [PHP] 50,000.00 as exemplary damages. Moreover, the fines imposed by , Regional Trial Court (RTC) of shall not earn legal interest.

The remainder of the dispositive portion stands.

SO ORDERED.[49] (Emphasis in the original)

This led Ceballos and Balaston to file a Motion for Reconsideration dated March 31, 2022[50] which was also denied by the CA in a Resolution dated January 11, 2023, to wit:

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the instant motion for reconsideration is denied.

SO ORDERED.[51] (Emphasis in the original)

The Present Appeal

Ceballos and Balaston then filed the herein Petition, alleging that the CA and FC erred in convicting them of violations of Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610, and Balaston separately for acts of lasciviousness, despite the People's failure to prove their guilt beyond reasonable doubt due to the victims' alleged inconsistent testimonies.[52]

The People filed its Comment dated September 11, 2023, maintaining that it proved Ceballos and Balaston's guilt beyond reasonable doubt and the credibility of the victims' testimonies.[53]

Issues

The issues to be resolved in this case are whether the CA erred in the following:

1. Affirming the FC Decision ruling that the Information sufficiently charged Ceballos and Balaston with the crimes of violation of Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610 and acts of lasciviousness defined under Article 336 of the Revised Penal Code (RPC), in relation to Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610;
2. Sustaining the FC Decision convicting Ceballos for three counts of violation of Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610 and Balaston for two counts of violation of Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610 and one count of acts of lasciviousness under Article 336 of the RPC in relation to Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610 despite the alleged inconsistent testimony of the minor victims; and
3. Modifying the amounts of civil liability imposed by the FC.

Ruling

While a conviction is proper, petitioners are guilty of qualified trafficking pursuant to Section 4(a), in relation to Section 6, of Republic Act No. 9208, and not violation of Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610 and acts of lasciviousness defined under Article 336 of the RPC, in relation to Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610.

The Information dated May 10, 2018 is sufficient

Preliminarily, petitioners allege that the Information dated May 10, 2018, was irregular because it charged more than one offense and did not express the specific dates of the alleged sexual abuse.[54]

A perusal of the records indicates that the Information does charge the accused with more than one offense. This may be a ground to move to quash an information under Rule 117, Section 3(f) of the Rules of Court, viz.:

Section 3. Grounds. — The accused may move to quash the complaint or information on any of the following grounds:

....

(f) That more than one offense is charged except when a single punishment for various offenses is prescribed by law[.]

The Court agrees with the CA's findings that petitioners did not timely raise their objection to the defective Information. Thus, they are deemed to have waived their rights to any of the defects in the Information filed against them or object to the same.[55] Rule 117, Section 9 of the Rules of Court states the effect of a failure to move to quash, to wit:

Section 9. Failure to move to quash or to allege any ground therefor. — The failure of the accused to assert any

ground of a motion to quash before he pleads to the complaint or information, either because he did not file a motion to quash or failed to allege the same in said motion, shall be deemed a waiver of any objections based on the grounds provided for in paragraphs (a), (b), (g), and (i) of Section 3 of this Rule.

Verily, the remedy for the accused in cases of duplicitous information is to move to quash it before entering his plea. The Court has consistently ruled that failure to do so is a waiver of such a defect.[56] Therefore, the Information filed against petitioners can be considered as valid.

Anent the allegation that there was a variance in the dates stated in the Information (January to May 4, 2018) and what had been proven during the trial (February 2, 6, and May 4, 2018), the Court agrees with the findings of the CA to uphold the validity of the Information. The CA noted that in crimes where the date of commission is not a material element, it is not necessary to allege the date with absolute specificity in the information. What is required is that the date of the crime be approximated. Further, the CA had settled that since the date of commission was not required with exactitude, the allegation in an information regarding the date of the commission turning out to be different from the one established during trial would not be considered an error fatal to the prosecution.[57]

The Rules of Court have already established that it is not necessary to determine the precise date in an information except when it is a material element of the offense.[58] A charge against Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610 does not include the date of the commission of the offense as part of its material elements.[59] Therefore, there is no obligation to allege the date of the commission of the crime with absolute specificity in the information. What the Rules of Court require is that the information approximates the date of the crime.[60] In this case, the information included a range of dates where the commission of the crime was subsequently proven in trial. This being so, the Court is convinced that the Information remains sufficient.

An appeal throws the entire case open for review

As the final arbiter exercising appellate jurisdiction over lower courts, the Court has the power to review, revise, reverse, modify, or affirm on appeal or certiorari final judgments and orders of the lower courts.[61]

Thus, when an accused files an appeal from a judgment in a criminal case, this throws the entire case open for review, which may ultimately result in a heavier penalty or even reverse the downgrading of the offense when the Court finds guilt beyond reasonable doubt for the crime carrying the more severe penalty, viz.:

In criminal cases, an appeal opens the entire case for review and the reviewing tribunal can correct errors, though unassigned in the appealed judgment, or even reverse the trial court's decision based on grounds other than those that the parties raised as errors. The appeal confers the appellate court full jurisdiction over the case and renders such court competent to examine records, revise the judgment appealed from, increase the penalty, and cite the proper provision of the penal law.[62]

In this case, upon a careful reading of the records, the Court finds that petitioners committed acts that fall squarely within the definition of qualified trafficking in Republic Act No. 9208, and not under Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610 and acts of lasciviousness defined under Article 336 of the RPC, in relation to Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610, which the lower courts convicted them of.

Petitioners are guilty of qualified trafficking in persons

The Court adopts the factual determinations of the FC and CA, and finds that the crime committed by petitioners is that which is charged in the Information or qualified trafficking in persons, pursuant to Section 4(a), in relation to Section 6, of Republic Act No. 9208, as amended by Republic Act No. 10364, and not Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610.

Section 4(a) of Republic Act No. 9208, as amended by Republic Act No. 10364 provides the following as a definition for acts of trafficking in persons:

Section 4. Acts of Trafficking in Persons. — It shall be unlawful for any person, natural or juridical, to commit any of the following acts:

(a) To recruit, transport, transfer, harbor, provide, or receive a person by any means, including those done under the pretext of domestic or overseas employment or training or apprenticeship, for the purpose of prostitution, pornography, sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery, involuntary servitude or debt bondage[.] (Emphasis supplied)

Meanwhile, Section 6 of the same law provides that trafficking in persons is qualified when the trafficked person is a child, and Section 3(b) provides that a child refers to a person below 18 years of age.[63]

The elements of qualified trafficking in persons pursuant to Section 4(a), in relation to Sections 3(b) and 6, are as follows: (1) the trafficked victim was a child; (2) the act of recruitment, obtaining, hiring, providing, offering, transportation, transfer, maintaining, harboring, or receipt of persons with or without the victim's consent or knowledge, within or across national borders; and (3) the purpose of trafficking includes the exploitation or the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery, servitude or the removal or sale of organ.[64]

To recall, the Information alleges that petitioners unlawfully and feloniously maintained and hired 12-year-old AAA, 11-year-old BBB, and 13-year-old CCC to engage in prostitution or sexually exploited them by repeatedly fellating the said minors and giving them monetary considerations to do the sexual acts.

In its Decision dated July 31, 2019, the FC noted the following acts established by the prosecution:

Accused Jaycee Dee and AAA

1. On February 2 and 6 and May 4, 2018, Jaycee Dee and AAA went to a sirang bahay in .
2. Jayce Dee performed fellatio (put penis in mouth) on AAA.
3. Jaycee Dee gave money to AAA.

Accused Benjie and CCC

1. On February 2 and May 4, 2018, Benjie and CCC went to a sirang bahay in .
2. Benjie performed fellatio (put penis in mouth) on CCC.
3. Benjie gave money to CCC.

Accused Benjie and BBB

1. On May 4, 2018, Benjie and BBB went to a sirang bahay in .
2. Benjie performed fellatio (put penis in mouth) on BBB.
3. Benjie gave money to BBB.[65] (Emphasis in the original)

Bearing in mind the foregoing, the Court is convinced that the prosecution established the elements of qualified trafficking in persons.

After all, the minority of AAA, BBB, and CCC were all proven during the trial. Moreover, their testimonies

clearly showed that petitioners maintained, hired, and/or recruited them in the sirang bahay, as affirmed by the FC and the CA. Lastly, petitioners performed fellatio on them in exchange for money, thus sexually exploiting AAA, BBB, and CCC.

At this juncture, the Court finds it proper to emphasize that in its recent pronouncement in *People v. Peek*,^[66] the definition of sexual exploitation and prostitution does not require that the victim be hired by the other person to be hired out to another person, viz.:

The definition of sexual exploitation and prostitution does not require that the victim to be transacted, hired, or recruited by the other person to be pimped out to another person (customer or client). While a person can act as a pimp to offer someone to a customer for prostitution, the term prostitution does not preclude a scenario wherein the person who recruit, harbor, receive, or maintain a person is the one who will use said person. In both scenarios, there can be trafficking in person under [Republic Act No.] 9208.^[67] (Emphasis supplied)

In sum, the Court finds that the crime petitioners committed is qualified trafficking in persons, pursuant to Section 4(a) in relation to Sections 3(b) and 6 of Republic Act No. 9208, as amended by Republic Act No. 10364, and not for what they have been convicted by both the FC and CA.

Balaston's charge for one count of acts of lasciviousness under Article 336 of Act No. 3815, as amended by the RPC, in relation to Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610 should be modified to one act of qualified trafficking in persons pursuant to Section 4(a) of Republic Act No. 9208

Further, the Court notes that Balaston performed fellatio on an 11-year-old BBB in exchange for money on May 4, 2018, which led him to be charged for another count of acts of lasciviousness under Article 336 of Act No. 3815, as amended by the RPC, in relation to Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610. As discussed in the preceding section, this act also falls under the definition of qualified trafficking in persons.

Section 3(b) of Republic Act No. 9208 defines a child as any person under 18 years old.^[68] BBB was considered a child under said law when Balaston committed the act. Necessarily, Balaston's actions towards BBB are considered qualified trafficking in persons and not acts of lasciviousness under Article 336 of Act No. 3815, as amended by the RPC, in relation to Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610.

Therefore, the Court finds it appropriate to modify his charge for another count of acts of lasciviousness under Article 336 of Act No. 3815, as amended by the RPC, in relation to Section 5(b) of Republic Act No. 7610, to the same act of qualified trafficking in persons pursuant to Section 4(a), in relation to Sections 3(b) and 6 of Republic Act No. 9208, as amended.

The prosecution was able to establish beyond reasonable doubt that petitioners are guilty of qualified trafficking in persons

The Petition hinges on the claim that the prosecution was not able to establish the guilt of petitioners beyond reasonable doubt due to the alleged inconsistent testimonies of the minor victims. Specifically, the Petition asserts that the CA disregarded BBB's inconsistent testimony regarding the date when BBB met Ceballos. BBB stated that he met Ceballos through AAA on January 3, 2018 and that it was also the same day of the first incident of abuse. Meanwhile, both AAA and CCC claim that they first met Ceballos on February 2, 2018. According to

petitioners, the victims's contradictory statements marred the credibility and truthfulness of their claims.[69]

These arguments fail to convince the Court and are wholly unavailing. It is a well-entrenched principle that when it comes to the question of credibility of the victim or prosecution witnesses, the findings of trial courts carry great weight and respect and, generally, the appellate courts will not overturn the said findings unless the trial court overlooked, misunderstood, or misapplied some facts or circumstances of weight and substance which will alter the assailed decision or affect the result of the case. Trial courts are in the best position to determine the sincerity and spontaneity of witnesses because they can observe their demeanor in court.[70]

More importantly, the testimony of a child victim is accorded full weight and credit as youth and immaturity are generally badges of truth and sincerity.[71] While there may be inconsistencies when a victim recounts a traumatizing event, what is essential is their consistent declarations of the elements of the crime and the positive identification of the perpetrator.[72]

In this case, the FC found the testimony of the child victims as "distinctively clear, frank, and definite without any pretension or hint of a concocted story." [73] Neither the FC nor the CA found any reason to question the credibility of the child witnesses's testimonies. The Court finds no reason at all not to do the same. While there may be a contradiction in BBB's recollection of the date when he met Ceballos, the story of the child victims remains intact—that petitioners committed acts of sexual abuse against them in the sirang bahay. Further, it is settled that a witness's inconsistency on minor details does not affect their credibility as long as there are no material contradictions on the incident and the identification of the accused as the perpetrator.[74]

On the other hand, petitioners denied the charges against them. Time and again, this Court has held that denial is inherently a weak defense and absent strong evidence to contradict the victims' claims, this defense deserves scant consideration.[75] Evidently, the CA did not err in upholding the FC's conviction of petitioners.

Penalties and civil liabilities ex delicto

Given that the proper designation of the crime committed by petitioners is qualified trafficking in persons pursuant to Republic Act No. 9208, as amended by Republic Act No. 10364, a modification of the penalties and civil liabilities ex delicto is in order.

Section 10(e) of Republic Act No. 9208, as amended by Republic Act No. 10364, provides the following penalty for violation of qualified trafficking in persons:

Section 10. Penalties and Sanctions. – The following penalties and sanctions are hereby established for the offenses enumerated in this Act:

....

(e) Any person found guilty of qualified trafficking under Section 6 shall suffer the penalty of life imprisonment and a fine of not less than Two million pesos ([PHP] 2,000,000.00) but not more than Five million pesos ([PHP] 5,000,000.00).[.]

Therefore, petitioners are sentenced to suffer the penalty of life imprisonment and to pay a fine of PHP 2,000,000.00 for committing the crime of qualified trafficking in persons.

As Balaston is charged with Ceballos in just one Information, he can be held liable only for one count of qualified trafficking in persons, even if, in his case, two victims became the subject thereof.

In *People v. Lim*, [76] the accused was likewise found guilty of qualified trafficking in persons and sentenced to life imprisonment plus a fine of PHP 2,000,000.00.[77] Notably, the accused was charged in a singular

information wherein it was alleged that there were six victims with incidents occurring from July to August 2017.[78]

Ceballos is ordered to pay AAA the amount of PHP 500,000.00 as moral damages, and PHP 100,000.00 as exemplary damages. While Balaston is ordered to pay BBB and CCC individually the amount of PHP 500,000.00 as moral damages, and PHP 100,000.00 as exemplary damages to BBB and CCC, individually, pursuant to prevailing jurisprudence.[79]

ACCORDINGLY, the Petition for Review on Certiorari dated March 7, 2023 is DENIED. The February 28, 2022 Decision and January 11, 2023 Resolution of the Court of Appeals are AFFIRMED WITH MODIFICATION. The Court finds petitioner Neil John Ceballos y Tablate GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt of qualified trafficking in persons pursuant to Section 4(a), in relation to Section 6 of Republic Act No. 9208 as amended by Republic Act No. 10364. Neil John Ceballos y Tablate is hereby

1. SENTENCED to suffer the penalty of life imprisonment;
2. ORDERED to PAY a fine of PHP 2,000,000.00; and
3. ORDERED to PAY AAA PHP 500,000.00 as moral damages and PHP 100,000.00 as exemplary damages, which shall earn interest at the rate of 6% per annum from the finality of the Decision until fully paid.

Likewise, the Court finds petitioner Benjie Balaston y Francisco GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt of qualified trafficking in persons pursuant to Section 4(a), in relation to Section 6 of Republic Act No. 9208 as amended by Republic Act No. 10364. Benjie Balaston y Francisco is hereby

1. SENTENCED to suffer the penalty of life imprisonment;
2. ORDERED to PAY a fine of PHP 2,000,000.00;
3. ORDERED to PAY BBB PHP 500,000.00 as moral damages and PHP 100,000.00 as exemplary damages, which shall earn interest at the rate of 6% per annum from the finality of the Decision until fully paid; and
4. ORDERED to PAY CCC PHP 500,000.00 as moral damages and PHP 100,000.00 as exemplary damages, which shall earn interest at the rate of 6% per annum from the finality of the Decision until fully paid.

SO ORDERED.

Leonen, SAJ. (Chairperson), Lazaro-Javier, and Kho, Jr., JJ., concur.
Lopez,[*] J., on leave.

[*] On leave.

[1] Rollo, pp. 12-38 (with Annex "A" to Annex "G," pp. 39-151).

[2] "Neil Jhon Ceballos y Tablate" in some parts of the rollo.

[3] Rollo, pp. 39-61 (Annex "A" – Petition). The February 28, 2022 Decision in CA-G.R. CR No. 43865 was penned by Associate Justice Maria Elisa Sempio Diy and concurred in by Associate Justices Carlito B. Calpatura and Michael P. Ong of the Seventeenth Division, Court of Appeals, Manila.

[4] Id. at 62-67 (Annex "B" – Petition). The January 11, 2023 Resolution in CA-G.R. CR No. 43865 was penned by Associate Justice Maria Elisa Sempio Diy and concurred in by Associate Justices Carlito B. Calpatura and

Michael P. Ong of the Former Seventeenth Division, Court of Appeals, Manila.

[5] Id. at 86-115 (Appendix "A" of Annex "C" – Petition). The July 31, 2019 Decision in Criminal Case No. 31378-2018C was penned by Presiding Judge Virgilio B. Gesmundo of Branch , Family Court, City.

[6] Entitled "An Act Providing For Stronger Deterrence and Special Protection Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination, Providing Penalties For Its Violation, and For Other Purposes" (1992).

[7] Entitled "An Act Revising the Penal Code and Other Penal Laws" (1930).

[8] Rollo, pp. 58-60.

[9] Not attached to the rollo.

[10] Rollo, pp. 41, 86.

[11] Supreme Court Amended Administrative Circular No. 83-2015 states that the geographical location where the crime was committed should refer only to the province where the crime occurred. References to the specific barangay or town should be blotted out from the body of the court decision if its identification could lead to the disclosure of the women or children victims.

[12] The records do not include the real name of the victim.

[13] The records do not include the real name of the victim.

[14] The records do not include the real name of the victim.

[15] Rollo, pp. 41, 86.

[16] Id.

[17] Id. at 42.

[18] "First victim" in some parts of the rollo.

[19] "Second victim" in some parts of the rollo.

[20] "Third victim" in some parts of the rollo.

[21] "" in some parts the rollo.

[22] Rollo, pp. 42, 87.

[23] Id. at 42, 88.

[24] The records do not include the full name.

[25] Rollo, pp. 42, 88.

[26] Id. at 43, 88.

[27] Id.

[28] Id.

[29] Id. at 43, 89.

[30] Id. at 44, 89.

[31] Id.

[32] Id.

[33] Id. at 44.

[34] Id. at 45.

[35] Id. at 45, 89-90.

[36] Id. at 45, 90.

[37] Id.

[38] Id.

[39] Id. at 114-115.

[40] Id. at 91-114.

[41] Id. at 105.

[42] Entitled "An Act to Institute Policies to Eliminate Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Establishing the Necessary Institutional Mechanisms For The Protection and Support of Trafficked Persons, Providing Penalties for Its Violations, and For Other Purposes" (2003).

[43] Entitled "An Act Expanding Republic Act No. 9208, Entitled 'An Act To Institute Policies To Eliminate Trafficking in Persons Especially Women And Children, Establishing The Necessary Institutional Mechanisms For The Protection And Support Of Trafficked Persons, Providing Penalties For Its Violations And For Other Purposes'" (2013).

[44] Rollo, pp. 105-107.

[45] Id. at 68-85.

[46] Id. at 76.

[47] Id. at 116-132 (Annex "D" – Petition).

[48] Id. at 123-131.

[49] Id. at 60.

[50] Id. at 136-144 (Annex "F" – Petition).

[51] Id. at 67.

[52] Id. at 21.

[53] Id. at 153-175.

[54] Id. at 76.

[55] Id. at 49-50.

[56] *People v. XXX*, 904 Phil. 973, 980 (2021) [Per J. J. Lopez, Third Division].

[57] Rollo, pp. 50-51.

[58] RULES OF COURT, Rule 110, sec. 11.

[59] *Capueta v. People of the Philippines*, 883 Phil. 502, 510-511 (2020) [Per J. Delos Santos, Second Division].

[60] RULES OF COURT, Rule 110, sec. 6.

[61] CONST., art. VIII, sec. 5(2).

[62] *People v. XXX262846*, G.R. No. 262846, February 18, 2025 [Per J. Kho, Jr., En Banc] at 7. This pinpoint citation refers to the copy of the Decision uploaded to the Supreme Court website.

[63] Republic Act No. 9208 (2003), secs. 3(b), 6.

[64] Republic Act No. 9208 (2003), secs. 4(a), 6. (Emphasis supplied)

[65] Rollo, pp. 104-105.

[66] G.R. No. 256452, February 25, 2025 [Per J. Kho, En Banc].

[67] *Id.* at 20. This pinpoint citation refers to the copy of the Decision uploaded to the Supreme Court website.

[68] Republic Act No. 9208 (2003), sec. 3(b), reads:

(b) Child – refers to a person below 18 years of age or one who is over 18 but is unable to fully take care of or protect himself/herself from abuse, neglect, cruelty, exploitation, or discrimination because of a physical or mental disability or condition.

[69] Rollo, pp. 18-19, 29-30.

[70] *People v. Tulagan*, 849 Phil. 197, 217 (2019) [Per J. Peralta, En Banc].

[71] *People v. XXX*, 920 Phil. 272, 293 (2022) [Per J. Hernando, Second Division].

[72] *People v. Tulagan*, 849 Phil. 197, 218 (2019) [Per J. Peralta, En Banc].

[73] Rollo, p. 111.

[74] *People v. Dimapilit*, 816 Phil. 523, 541 (2017) [Per J. Leonen, Second Division].

[75] *AAA261422 v. XXX261422*, 949 Phil. 236, 256 (2023) [Per J. Lazaro-Javier, Second Division].

[76] 914 Phil. 374 (2021) [Per J. Inting, Second Division].

[77] *Id.* at 386-387.

[78] *Id.* at 374-375.

[79] *People v. Peek*, G.R. No. 256452, February 25, 2025 [Per J. Kho, Jr., En Banc] at 22. This pinpoint citation refers to the copy of the Decision uploaded to the Supreme Court website.

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