

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. JUAN REMOTO Y FAJELA @ JOHNNY, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

G.R. Nos. 113057-58. May 29, 1995

Ponente: PUNO, J.

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PUNO, J.:

Few crimes can exceed in bestiality the crime of non-consensual sex against children. In the case at bench, the victims of appellant's lust are two six-year-old children, then in Kindergarten school. Still in their age of innocence, their credibility cannot be eroded by obvious attempts at obfuscation. We affirm the conviction of appellant for rape on two (2) counts.

On January 10, 1992, two separate Criminal Complaints were filed before the Regional Trial Court of Bataan,[1] charging appellant JUAN "JOHNNY" FAJELA REMOTO of raping LESLIE MARRIS SANTOS[2] and CARABELLA J. VIRAY,[3] when they were both six-years-old, as follows:

"That in or about the period from November to December, 1989 in Mariveles, Bataan, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the said accused thru force and intimidation, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously lie and succeed to have sexual intercourse with the offended party ' Leslie Marris Santos, a six year old minor girl, to her damage and prejudice;"[4]

and

"That in or about April, 1991 in Mariveles, Bataan, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the said accused thru force and intimidation, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously lie and succeed to have sexual intercourse with the offended party Carabella J. Viray, a six year old minor, girl, against the will and consent of the latter, to her damage and prejudice."[5]

On May 20, 1992, appellant entered not guilty pleas upon arraignment in both cases. Trial proceeded against him.

The records show that complainants Leslie and Carabella lived in the same neighborhood as appellant in Balon Anito, Mariveles, Bataan. Appellant was well-known to the parents and relatives of the two children. In fact, he was one of the best friends of Carabella's uncle, defense witness ALLAN MAGLALANG[6], who eventually married appellant's sister.[7]

For a living, appellant drove and operated his father's tricycle.[8] In 1989, he was commissioned to act as "service" to Leslie, then a Kindergarten student at A.G. Llamas Elementary School.[9] He was tasked to take the child to school every morning in his tricycle, and bring her home when classes ended at lunchtime."[10]

One day in December, 1989, appellant did not take Leslie straight home from school.[11] Instead, he brought her to a place near the Mormon Church. The child readily tagged along when he promised her money. At the church grounds, appellant scattered some coins about and challenged Leslie to pick them up with her eyes closed. He also instructed her to bend over at the waist. She obliged.[12]

As Leslie groped around for the money, appellant stealthily approached her from behind. He raised her skirt, unzipped his pants, pulled aside the crotch area of her panty, and inserted his penis into her vagina.[13] Pain shot through Leslie's being as he introduced his manhood deeper into her maidenhood.[14] She felt it most acutely in the area of her anus."[15]

After Leslie's defloration, appellant ordered her to keep silent about the episode. He warned that if she did not, he would make her lose her way and she could not go back home.[16] Then, he left her at the scene of her shattered innocence. Thankfully, she knew her way home.[17]

Leslie sealed her lips about her violation. Little did she know that sixteen months later, her playmate and friend, Carabella, would suffer the same cruel fate at the hands of appellant.

Carabella's ordeal happened one night in April, 1991, barely a month after she graduated from Kindergarten.[18] As was often the case around that time, Balon Anito, Mariveles was plunged into darkness by a power failure. During the brown-out, appellant approached Carabella and told her that he would buy her a lollipop. Lured by the promise, she went with him.[19]

Unfortunately, appellant was driven by his sexual passion. Instead of bringing Carabella to the candy store, he brought her to the house next-door to the Virays'.[20] Carabella's maternal grandmother, ESTELLA MAGLALANG, her second husband JESUS MAGLALANG, and their son, Allan, lived in that house, but none of them was home at that time.[21]

Appellant, a frequent visitor to the Maglalangs' house,[22] was familiar with it. He led Carabella up to Allan Maglalang's room,[23] which was never locked.[24] There, he took off her short pants and made her lie down on her uncle's bed. After that, he took off his shorts and bestraddled her[25] He pierced her sexual organ with his, causing her pain. [26] When she cried, he warned her that if she told anyone about the incident, she would get a spanking from him. A few moments later, a white substance trickled out of appellant's penis and fell on her thigh.[27]

Meanwhile, Carabella's ten-year-old sister, BRENDA LYN VIRAY,[28] went to the Maglalang residence to look for her. She heard someone crying in her Uncle Allan's room. She went up to investigate and saw appellant lying on top of Carabella, both of them naked from the waist down.[29] Carabella was unaware of the presence of her older sister, who stood frozen in her tracks. Appellant, however, got aware of Brendalyn's presence and immediately stood up. Hurriedly, he put on his shorts and scampered down the stairs.[30]

It was only then that Carabella saw Brendalyn, who succeeded in making her younger sister stop crying. Appellant's semen which stuck to Carabella's thigh caught the interest of the children. They went downstairs to the kitchen where Brendalyn, with the aid of a gas lamp, examined the white, sticky liquid more closely. It was then that their grandmother arrived home.[31]

Estella Maglalang asked her grandchildren what they were doing and why Carabella had no panties on. Neither girl said anything.[32] The old woman did not pursue her line of questioning and merely gave the children binatog. The two stayed at the Manglalang residence until they were called home by their mother.[33] Neither told their parents what had transpired earlier that night.[34]

Months passed, and the complainants' silence on the matter of their abuse remained unbroken. Had it not been for an overheard conversation between them, the matter may have remained their dark secret.

On January 4, 1992, there was a celebration held at Leslie's residence, with Carabella as one of their guests. During the party, the two girls discussed what appellant did to them.[35] They did not know that Leslie's cousin,

CYRIL LACUNA, was within their earshot and listening.[36] Cyril approached Leslie's mother, RUBYLINE SANTOS,[37] presumably to tell her what he heard. However, Carabella cried and prevented him from doing so.[38]

Carabella's actions raised Rubyline's suspicions, so she asked her daughter about it. At first, Leslie balked. With some prodding, however, the child finally poured her heart out to her mother. She narrated what happened to her at the Mormon Church, as well as what Carabella suffered at the hands of appellant at the Maglalang residence.[39] Rubyline wept as she listened to her young child's revelation. She could not fathom how appellant, whom they had known for a long time, could do such atrocious thing to Leslie. She and her husband agreed to file a case against appellant.[40]

That night, Rubyline told Carabella's mother, CARMELA VIRAY[41] what she had learned from Leslie.[42] After the story confirmed by her daughter, Brendalyn, Carmela cried a river at realization that Carabella's future was irrevocably ruined.[43] She and her husband felt very weak. Neither could believe that Carabella could suffer such a cruel fate at her tender age. They decided to seek redress in our courts of justice.[44]

On January 6, 1992, a Monday, Leslie and Carabella were brought to DR. WILLIE CALIMBAS, for physical and internal examinations.[45] He found a healed laceration at the nine o'clock (9:00) position, on Leslie's hymen.[46] He discovered no laceration on Carabella's private organ, but found her hymenal hole to be enlarged.[47]

For his part, appellant put forth the defenses of denial and alibi. He denied that he was ever hired to transport Leslie to and from school, [48]and likewise denied that he had abused the two complainants.[49] He theorized that the accusations against him were concocted by Leslie's mother, who was mad at him for refusing to be the child's "tricycle service,"[50] and Carabella's father, who once beat him up while in a drunken stupor.[51]

Two other defense witnesses took the stand. Carabella's uncle and appellant's brother-in-law, Allan Maglalang, testified that during the entire month of April, 1991, he never left his bedroom to go anywhere else. On the other hand, he testified that, since February, 1991, he has been working as a factory worker in an export enterprise. The other witness/ JANE PENALOZA,[52] told the court that appellant had been residing at her house — which is twelve to thirteen kilometers from Balon Anito, Mariveles, Bataan -- since August, 1989 until the time of his arrest in January, 1992. According to her, appellant did not leave her house, except to deliver money to his parents in Balon Anito.⁵³ He usually left for Balon Anito[53] at ten o'clock in the morning (10 a.m.), and was back at witness's house by one or two o'clock in the afternoon (1:00 or 2:00 p.m.).[54]

At trial's end, the court a quo promulgated a Joint Decision, dated November 24, 1993, finding appellant "guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of rape as defined and penalized under Article 335, par. 3 of the Revised Penal Code,"[55] and sentenced him as follows:

"In Criminal Case No. ML-626 -- to suffer the penalty of RECLUSION PERPETUA, with all the accessory penalties provided for by law, to pay the complainant-victim CARABELLA VIRAY the amount of P50,000.00 as and by way of indemnification, and to pay the costs; and

"In Criminal Case No. ML-627-- to suffer the penalty of RECLUSION PERPETUA, with all the accessory penalties provided for by law, to pay the complainant-victim LESLIE MARRIS SANTOS the amount of P50,000.00 as and by way of indemnification, and to pay the costs. [56]

Appellant now avers that "the trial court gravely erred in finding (him) guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime(s) charged,"[57] considering that it "failed to see the infirmities in the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses." [58]

The appeal is without merit.

When a witness testifies, the visual dimension of his testimony is best caught and appreciated by the observant eye of the trial judge. For this reason, appellate courts pay obeisance to the general rule that findings of fact of trial courts, especially with respect to the credibility of witnesses who personally appeared and testified before them, must be given great weight and should not be disturbed by appellate courts. Our review of the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses -- particularly Leslie's and Carabella's -- leaves us with a good impression. We agree wholeheartedly with the observations of the trial court, to wit:

"The offended parties while they are still guileless children of tender age, have recounted their own ravishments in a starkly simple and spontaneous, yet coherent and candid manner as to preclude prevarication or evasiveness. It is a revelation of innocent children whose virtues were abused by the accused. All throughout their court testimony, they remained as assertive and steadfast about the despicable assault on their chastity as well as the identity of the accused as their rapist. They could not have been mistaken in identifying the accused as they knew him too well, being their neighbor and tricycle service driver. The Court is more than satisfied that they were the unwilling victims of grievous outrages committed by a paraphiliac predator. To the mind of the Court, (the complainants) with their perceptiveness, as well as their full understanding of the obligations of an oath and what they were testifying to, are thus competent to testify and fall outside the ambit of the disqualification of a 'child-witness of tender age' as contemplated by Rule 30, Section 19, sub. par. (b) of the Rules of Court.

"XXX XXX XXX

"In the course of the trial of these two cases, the Court has observed the refined and dignified demeanor exhibited by the offended parties. Individually, when they testified, each answered the questions propounded on (sic) them promptly, spontaneously and forthrightly. Each recounted her harrowing experience vividly and with sincere feeling as only a guileless girl of tender age who has actually undergone such (an) ordeal can describe. They were subjected to a rigorous cross-examination but they stood firm and were able to weather it down, thereby discounting the possibility that they have been tutored or rehearsed before taking the-witness stand;"[59]

and, hence, will not deviate from the rule that "testimonies of rape victims who are young and immature are credible; the revelation of an innocent child whose chastity was abused deserves full credence." [60] We also grant the badge of credibility to the testimony of the third minor witness, Brendalyn Viray, who was consistent and straightforward in answering questions propounded to her.

Not unnaturally, inconsistencies exist in the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses. However, these hardly relate to matters material to the commission of statutory rape, for which appellant was convicted. Such superfluous lapses do not weaken the probative values of the testimonies. On the contrary, they strengthen the credibility and show the sincerity of those who testified. Imperfect senses cannot be the source of perfect testimonies.[61] This is a rule that resonates with reality.

Firstly, we are not persuaded by appellant's posturing that neither Carabella nor Brendalyn could have seen what they testified on because of the brown-out that occurred on the night of Carabella's rape. He has no basis for assuming that the power outage threw the Maglalang residence into darkness so absolute as to preclude anyone from seeing anything, for neither counsel queried the Viray sisters about the degree of queried the Viray sisters about the degree of illumination then available inside Allan Maglalang's room. On the contrary, both girls testified that they saw and observed things and events that occurred inside room on that night. Brendalyn, for instance, testified, *inter alia*:

" xxx xxx xxx

"FISCAL TARIO:

"Q

Can you describe to this honorable court what kind of abuse Johnny Remoto did to your sister Carabella?

"A

Yes, sir.

"Q

Then, please tell it to this honorable court.

"A

I went inside the house of» my grandmother and then I heard somebody crying. What I did was I went upstairs and there I saw Johnny Remoto on top of my sister, sir.

"Q

When you say on top, what do you mean?

"A

I cannot understand, sir.

"Q

Is Johnny Remoto fully clothed while on top of your sister?

"A

No, sir.

"Q

What was his condition then as regards his clothing?

"A

I am not sure, sir. Because there was a brown-out.

"Q

Was he naked?

"ATTY. NAVARRO:

Very leading, your honor.

"FISCAL TARIO:

I have already laid the basis, your honor.

"COURT":

Witness may answer.

"A

" His clothes are on his shoulder, sir.

"A

He has no pants on, sir.

"Q

How about your sister, was she fully clothed?

"A

She has her clothes on, sir, but without her panty

" XXX XXX XXX

"FISCAL TARIO:

"Q

You said that you saw Johnny Remoto on top of your sister inside the room of your Uncle Allan. Did Johnny or your sister see you?

"ATTY. NAVARRO:

Very leading, your honor.

"COURT

Witness may answer.

"A

Only Johnny Remoto, sir.

"FISCAL TARIO:

"Q

When Johnny saw you, what did Johnny do, if any?

"A

He stood up and wore his pair of shorts that has a hole on the right buttock, sir.

"Q

And after pulling up his shorts, what did Johnny Remoto do, if any?

"A

He ran going downstairs, sir.

"xxx xxx xxx "[62]

Secondly, the rhetorical statement in the appeal brief that "if indeed (Carabella) was raped by (appellant), why would he choose her grandparent's house, of all places xxx (when he) was aware that anytime, one of the occupants of the house would arrive,"[63] is plain sophistry. In the recent case of *People v. Guibao*, 217 SCRA 64, 74 (1993), this Court shot down the contention that it is inconceivable for a person to commit a crime of rape in the house in front of the victims house at daytime, in this wise:

"We have ruled that it is quite possible for an experienced man to consummate rape in just one minute, without - attracting the attention of the people inside the apartment xxx. In several cases, the Court has held that rape can be committed even in places where people congregate: in parks, along the roadside, within school premises, and even inside a house where there are occupants xxx. While the defense would feign incredulity that the crime could take place at daytime in the house of appellant which is just in front the victim's house, it is not impossible that such brutish act of a depraved man was actually committed there. Lust, it has been repeatedly said, is no respecter of time and place." (Citations omitted.)

Thirdly, when Carabella testified that Brendalyn did not see appellant on that fateful night, she did not contradict her older sister's claim that she saw appellant on top of Carabella on Allan Maglalang's bed. It must be noted that Brendalyn narrated to the trial court that as she witnessed appellant bestraddling Carabella, only appellant saw her. It was only after appellant had fled that Carabella saw Brendalyn.

Fourthly, appellant's argument that Leslie's rape could not have been perpetrated since Ruby line was not surprised to see her coming home alone and crying after it happened, deserves the scantest attention. His thesis is drawn from the assumptions that Leslie had arrived home after the incident crying, and that her mother, Rubyline, was at home when she got there. These assumptions, however, are without any factual basis. Hence, appellant's argument is erroneously presumptuous.

Fifthly, that neither of the victims "suffered shock, serious bleeding, extreme pain as well as loss of consciousness as a consequence of the sexual assaults"[64] does not mean that they were not raped. It is settled that neither complete penetration nor ejaculation is necessary to constitute rape. What is essential is that there be penetration of the female organ, no matter how slight.[65] In the case at bench, the medico-legal findings that Leslie's hymen bore a healed laceration and that Carabella's hymenal hole was enlarged evidence the occurrence of at least some degree of penetration into their vaginal orifices. Consistently with this, both minors testified on the matter, to wit:

"FISCAL TARIO:

"Q

You also said that yea were crying, what were you crying about?

(CARABELLA):

"A

Because it was painful, sir.

"Q

Which was painful?

"A

Because he inserted his thing (ano), sir.

"Q

Where did he insert his thing?

"A

(witness pointing to her private part)"[66]

and

"(FISCAL TARIO):

"Q

After he set aside your panty, what happened next?

"(LESLIE):

"A

He opened the zipper of his pants, sir, and inserted his penis.

Q

Where?

"A

On my private part, sir.

"Q

And what did you feel when he inserted his penis into your private part?

"A

It is very painful, sir."[67]

Penultimately, appellant cannot find support for his appeal in what he describes as the "unnatural" behavior of minors Carabella, Leslie, and even Brendalyn after the rapes. Suffice to stress, it is not proper to judge the actions of children who have undergone traumatic experiences by the norms of behavior expected under the circumstances from mature persons. The range of emotion shown by rape victims is yet to be captured even by the calculus. It is thus unrealistic to expect uniform reactions from rape victims.

Lastly, appellant's guilt cannot be negated by Leslie's testimony that her cousin, Cyril, had overheard her conversation with Carabella around Christmas time in 1990, instead of in January, 1992, as Rubylina stated. This is a minor lapse which cannot exculpate appellant. When Cyril actually heard Leslie speaking with Carabella is not decisive of his guilt or innocence.

Independently of the matters raised by appellant, we find that the court a quo correctly convicted appellant of two counts of statutory rape, the gravamen of which is the carnal knowledge of a woman below twelve (12) years of

age.[68] Both Leslie Marris Santos and Carabella Viray-indisputably both six-years-old at the time of the offences-positively identified appellant in open court as the man who inserted his penis into each of their sexual organs in December, 1990 and April, 1991, respectively. This is rape in any language.

Trite to state, appellant's defenses of denial and alibi cannot prevail over his positive identification by the complainants as their rapist. Neither he or nor any of his other witnesses could concretely place him away from the scenes of the crime at the times they were committed. His own testimony runs counter to defense witness Jane Penalzoza's assertion that he was staying with her and her husband, and working for them in their house full-time from August, 1989, until the time of his arrest. Furthermore, even if he were really residing at the Penalzoza's house at the times the two rapes took place, the outcome of the case at bench would not be changed. It is admitted that the house is a mere twelve kilometers from Balon Anito, and the distance between them can be covered in thirty (30) minutes.

IN VIEW WHEREOF, the appeal is DISMISSED for lack of merit. The convictions of appellant JUAN FAJELA REMOTO by the Regional Trial Court of Balanga, Bataan, Branch 4 in Criminal Cases No. ML-626 and ML-627 for rape are AFFIRMED IN TOTO.

SO ORDERED.

Narvasa, (Chairman), Regalado and Mendoza, JJ., concur.

[1] Both cases were raffled off to RTC Bataan, Branch 4, presided over by Judge Pedro B. Villafuerte, Jr. They were, respectively, docketed as Crim. Case No. ML-626 and Crim. Case No. ML-627.

[2] Testified on August 18, 1992 and August 18, and September 2, 1992, when she was nine (9) years old.

[3] Testified on August 4, 1992, when she was eight (8) years old.

[4] Original Records in Crim. Case No. ML-627, p. 1.

[5] Original Records in Crim. Case No. ML-626, p. 1.

[6] Defense witness who testified on March 24, 1992, when he was twenty-five (25) years old,

[7] TSN of March 24, 1992, p. 7.

[8] TSN of June 22, 1993, p. 8.

[9] TSN of September 23, 1992, p. 5.

[10] TSN of August 18, 1992, pp. 6-7.

[11] Ibid., at p. 13.

[12] Id., at p. 10.

[13] Id.

[14] Id., at p. 11.

[15] Id., at p. 12.

[16] Id.

[17] Id., at p. 11.

[18] TSN of August 4, 1992, p. 17; TSN of September 10, 1992, p. 3.

[19] TSN of August 4, 1992, p. 9.

[20] Ibid., at p. 15.

[21] Estella and Jesus were at the Mariveles market, selling meat, while Allan was also out. See TSN of August 4, 1992, p. 16; See also TSN of September 10, 1992, p. 8.

[22] TSN of August 4, 1992, p. 21; TSN of March 24, 1992, p. 8.

[23] TSN of August 4, 1992, p. 9.

[24] TSN of October 6, 1992, p. 12.

[25] TSN of August 4, 1992, p. 10.

[26] Ibid., at p. 12.

[27] Id., at p. 11.

[28] Testified on September 2 and 10, 1992, when she was twelve (12) years old.

[29] TSN of September 2, 1992, pp. 4-5; TSN of September 10, 1992, p. 5

[30] Ibid., at p. 6; TSN of September 2, 1992, p. 6.

[31] Ibid., at p. 7; TSN of September 10, 1992, p. 7.

[32] Ibid., at p. 9.

[33] TSN of September 2, 1992, p. 7.

[34] Id., at p. 8.

[35] TSN of September 23, 1992, p. 5.

[36] TSN of September 2, 1992, p. 16.

[37] Testified on September 23, 1992, when she was twenty-eight (28) years old.

[38] TSN of September 23, 1992, p. 6.

[39] Ibid., at p. 7.

[40] Id., at p. 12.

[41] Testified on October 6, 1992, when he was thirty-three (33) years old.

[42] Id., at p. 10; TSN of October 6, 1992, p. 6.

[43] Ibid., at p. 9.

[44] Id., at p. 6.

[45] Id., at p. 7; TSN of September 23, 1992, p. 11; See TSN of July 15 and 21, 1992.

[46] Exh. "A", Crim. Case No. ML-627, Original Records of Crim. Case No. ML-627, p. 141.

[47] Exh. "A", Crim. Case No. ML-62 6, Original Records of Crim. Case No. ML-626, p. 224.

[48] TSN of June 22, 1993, p. 10.

[49] Ibid., at p. 6.

[50] Id.

[51] Id., at p. 7.

[52] Testified on June 9, 1993, when she was thirty-one (31) ears old.

[53] TSN of June 10, 1993, pp. 4-6.

[54] Ibid., at pp. 7-8.

[55] Impugned Decision, p. 15; Rollo, p. 56.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Brief For The Accused-Appellant, p. 1.

[58] 58 Ibid., at pp. 7-8.

[59] Impugned Decision, pp. 7 and 12.

[60] People v. Guibao, 217 SCRA 64, 73 (1993), citing People v. San Buenaventura, 164 SCRA 150 (1989), People v. Bruca, 179 SCRA 64 (1989), and People v. Salita, 179 SCRA 438 (1989).

[61] People v. Coral, 230 SCRA 499, 511 (1994).

[62] TSN of September 2, 1992, pp. 4-6; Original Records in Crim. Case No. ML-626.

[63] Brief For The Accused-Appellant, p. 8.

[64] Ibid., at p. 10.

[65] People v. Mario Fabro y Arguiza, G.R. No. 104954, December 13, 1994, citing People v. Dabon, 216 SCRA 656 (1992); People, v. Pomentel, 216 SCRA 375 (1992); People v. Generalao, Jr., 213 SCRA 380 (1992); People v. Castro, 196 SCRA 679 (1991); People v. Bacalzo, 195 SCRA 557 (1991); People v. Yambao, 193 SCRA 571 (1991); People v. Banayo, 195 SCRA 543 (1991); People v. Castillo, 197 SCRA 657 (1991) ; People v. Tongson, 194 SCRA 257 (1991); and People v. Genores, 193 SCRA 2 63 (1991).

[66] TSN of August 4, 1992, p. 12.

[67] TSN of August 18, 1992, pp. 10-11.

[68] See People v. Espino, 230 SCRA 788 (1994).

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