

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, APPELLEE, VS. LAURITO ARRIOLA Y SANTANDER, APPELLANT.

G.R. Nos. 140779-80. December 03, 2002

Ponente: CORONA, J.

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CORONA, J.:

Before us for automatic review is the decision[1] of the Regional Trial Court of Lucena City, Branch 53, in Criminal Case Nos. 97-130 and 97-131, convicting appellant Laurito Arriola of the crime of rape on two counts committed against JudyLou Verso and sentencing him to suffer the supreme penalty of death for each count.

The two separate informations charging Laurito Arriola of the crime of rape read as follows:

Criminal Case No. 97-130

"That on or about the month of May 1995, at Barangay Marao, in the Municipality of Padre Burgos, Province of Quezon, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, who is the step-father of the offended party, with lewd design, by means of force, violence and intimidation, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously have carnal knowledge of one JudyLou C. Verso, a minor, 9 years of age, against her will.

Contrary to law."[2]

Criminal Case No. 97-131

"That on or about the 5th day of January 1997, at Barangay Marao, in the Municipality of Padre Burgos, Province of Quezon, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, who is the step-father of the offended party, with lewd design, by means of force, violence and intimidation, did then and there willfully, unlawfully, and feloniously have carnal knowledge of one JudyLou C. Verso, a minor, 10 years of age, against her will.

Contrary to law."[3]

When arraigned, the accused-appellant, assisted by Atty. Enrico Joaquin Villanueva, counsel de oficio, pleaded not guilty to the offenses charged.[4]

Trial on the merits thereafter ensued with the two cases (Criminal Case Nos. 97-130 and 97-131) jointly tried by the trial court. On September 8, 1999, the trial court rendered its decision, the dispositive portion of which reads:

"WHEREFORE, all the foregoing considered, the Court finds Laurito Arriola y Santander guilty beyond reasonable doubt of two counts of rape.

In Criminal Case No. 97-130 he is sentenced to suffer the supreme penalty of death and he is ordered to indemnify JudyLou Verso in the sum of P75,000.00 and to pay the costs.

In Criminal Case No. 97-131 he is sentenced to suffer the supreme penalty of death and he is ordered to indemnify JudyLou Verso in the sum of P75,000.00 and to pay the costs.

SO ORDERED."[5]

The antecedent facts, as culled from the testimonies of the witnesses, follow.

On January 23, 1997, at 3:40 p.m., Olivia Paulo (hereafter, Olivia), a teacher at the Padre Burgos Elementary School in Quezon Province, was practicing some pupils for a dance number at the school's hall. Suddenly, she heard a noise as if a desk was being dragged. She and Teresita Bejerano, the other teacher inside the hall, went to the adjacent classroom where the noise came from. They saw Judylou Verso (hereafter, Judylou) crying. The accused, Laurito Arriola, was also inside the classroom. Olivia asked the classmates of Judylou why she was crying. They told her that Laurito Arriola, Judylou's stepfather, wanted to fetch Judylou but she refused to go with him. Olivia told her co-teacher, Teresita Bejerano, to take Laurito Arriola out of the classroom. Arriola, who appeared drunk, obliged but when he reached the door of the hall, he boxed the wall. Sensing something wrong, Olivia told Judylou to go with her to the non-formal room which was then vacant. There she asked Judylou why she refused to go with her stepfather. At first, Judylou who looked frightened refused to talk. Eventually, because of Olivia's motivation, Judylou told Olivia that Arriola had sexually molested her ("ako ay ginalaw niya").[6] Olivia then told Teresita Bejerano (hereafter, Teresita), Judylou's teacher-in-charge, to also talk with Judylou. Teresita got the same information. With this disturbing information, Olivia sent the janitor of the school to the Padre Burgos police station to fetch some policemen. The chief of police, who headed the responding policemen, ordered his men to look for Arriola and advised Olivia to bring Judylou to a physician for physical examination.[7]

Judylou Verso was immediately brought to Dr. Grace Santiago, municipal health officer of Padre Burgos, Quezon for physical examination.[8] The findings of Dr. Santiago, based on the medico-legal certificate she issued dated January 23, 1997, read:

" watery vaginal discharge; erythematous vaginal wall; (+) hymenal tear; (+) healed lacerations on posterior vaginal fourchette; cervix is closed, long; uterus is small upon palpation.

Recommendation:

Advised psychological follow-up with psychiatrist for emotional preparation & stabilization."[9]

Judylou, who gave her age as eleven[10] when she took the witness stand on September 29, 1997, testified that, one night in May of 1995 inside their house in Barangay Marao, Padre Burgos, Quezon Province, she woke up to find the appellant Laurito Arriola whom she had come to consider as her father ("kinagisnang ama") [11] on top of her. Laurito stood up to remove her t-shirt, shorts and panty and then he undressed himself. He again went on top of Judylou and inserted his penis into her vagina.[12] The accused moved his buttocks up and down.[13] While on top of her, accused told Judylou not to tell anybody of what he was doing to her or else he would kill her and all members of her family.[14] Judylou could not do anything but cry. She felt pain because of what Laurito was doing to her but she did not say anything; she just continued crying.[15] Not long after, something came out of Laurito's penis. Laurito put on his brief and shorts, and repeated his threat to Judylou not to tell anybody or else he would kill all of them.[16]

Fearful of the threat made by Laurito whom she called Papa,[17] Judylou kept to herself what Laurito did to her.[18]

In the evening of January 5, 1997, Laurito again lay beside Judylou. He repeated what he did to Judylou before — he removed her t-shirt, shorts and panty; he undressed himself; he went on top of her; he inserted his penis into her vagina; and he moved his buttocks up and down.[19] While on top of her, he again repeated his warning to Judylou not to tell anybody what he was doing.[20] He kissed Judylou on the lips but Judylou just kept on

crying.[21] Just like before, Laurito stopped when something came out of his penis. He then stood up, put on his shorts and brief and again repeated his warning.[22]

Sometime thereafter, Judylou's mother, Lorena Calalo, returned to the Philippines from Hongkong where she was working as a domestic helper. Judylou told her mother what her stepfather did to her. Lorena cried and uttered bad things at Laurito ("nagmura po siya") in Judylou's presence. Before going back to Hongkong, Lorena left Judylou and her younger stepbrother and stepsister, aged 3 and 6 respectively, with their maternal grandmother, Anastacia Calalo.[23]

On January 23, 1997, Laurito tried to fetch Judylou from her school but Judylou created a commotion because she refused to go with him.[24] Judylou was afraid that he might rape her again.[25]

When it was the turn of the appellant to present his evidence, his counsel, Atty. Enrico Joaquin Villanueva, filed his withdrawal as counsel de oficio on the ground that he had irreconcilable differences with the accused in the conduct of his defense. After talking to the appellant, the court found the ground for withdrawing cited by Atty. Villanueva as unmeritorious and denied the same. The appellant agreed that Atty. Villanueva would continue to defend him. However, in a subsequent hearing, the appellant informed the court that his family had decided to secure the services of another lawyer. The court relieved Atty. Villanueva as counsel de oficio. But when, after several settings, no counsel de parte of the appellant appeared, the court, upon the request of the appellant himself, appointed Atty. Rodel Ambas as counsel de oficio.[26]

To the charge of raping his stepdaughter, Judylou Verso, the appellant set up the defense of denial. He testified that he did not know anything of the charges filed against him nor the reasons why Judylou charged him with rape.[27]

The trial court, taking into account the straightforward testimony of Judylou Verso and her demeanor while she testified, found the appellant guilty of the two counts of rape filed against him. The trial court did not believe the lame denial of the accused that he did not know anything of the charges filed against him. The trial court also rejected the insinuation of the defense that it was the anger and ill-feeling that Judylou felt towards her stepfather (the appellant) for treating her and her siblings badly that drove her to file the rape charges against the appellant.[28]

The trial court said that, Judylou, in her young and innocent mind, could not have concocted the story. She told her teachers of the sexual abuse, and only after some prodding, because it was true. Also, the trial court noted, it was not difficult to deduce that Judylou refused to go with the appellant when he went to fetch her from school in the afternoon of January 23, 1997, because the memory of the sexual assault by the appellant on January 5, 1997 (only about three weeks before) was still fresh in her mind and she was afraid that the appellant was going to do the same thing to her again. Lastly, the testimony of Dr. Grace Santiago gave credence to the allegation of Judylou that she had been raped. Dr. Santiago testified that the genitalia of Judylou had a healed laceration and admitted two fingers with ease during the physical examination. This indicates that she was no longer a virgin and that there was frequent penetration by the male organ. The trial court accordingly convicted the appellant of two counts of rape and sentenced him to suffer the supreme penalty of death for each count.[29]

Hence, the instant automatic review by us of the decision of the trial court. The appellant raises the following errors for our consideration:

I

That the Honorable Trial Court gravely erred in believing the claim of the complainant of her being raped by the accused;

II

That the Honorable Trial Court gravely erred in totally discarding the admission of the complainant's examining physician that the victim (complainant) had self induced her laceration;

III

That the Honorable Trial Court likewise gravely erred in disregarding the admission by the complainant of vindictiveness as her motive in falsely accusing the accused; and

IV

That the Honorable Trial Court gravely erred in convicting the accused.

The main argument of the appellant is that the trial court gravely erred in convicting him of the crime of rape in the light of (1) the admission of Dr. Santiago, the examining physician, that the victim self-inflicted the laceration found in her genitalia and (2) the admission of the victim herself that her motive in accusing the appellant of the crime of rape is to vindicate the bad treatment accorded her and her younger stepbrother and stepsister by the appellant.[30]

The argument of the appellant does not hold water.

Appellant wants to make it appear that Dr. Santiago categorically stated that the cause of the laceration in JudyLou's vaginal fourchette is self-inflicted. However, this is not true. The testimony of Dr. Santiago, taken as a whole, shows that she merely stated the possible causes of the laceration. She did not categorically state that the laceration was self-inflicted by the victim. Pertinent portions of her testimony are as follows:

"Q:

What did you find?

A:

In the internal examination there was hymenal tear and healed laceration on the posterior fourchette, sir.

Q:

Will you explain it in layman's language?

A:

There (sic) a healed laceration at the posterior fourchette of the vagina meaning near the opening of the anus sir.

xxxx xxxx xxxx

Q:

What else did you find?

ATTY. VILLANUEVA:

The best evidence is the medical certificate your honor.

COURT:

Witness may answer.

A:

When I inserted my finger it readily admit and upon examination of the cervix it was closed and the uterus is small and there was unremarkable adnexae sir.

XXXX XXXX XXXX

Q:

When the genitalia of a girl admits with ease the two fingers, what does it mean?

ATTY. VILLANUEVA:

Objection, that is hypothetical statement, your honor.

COURT:

Witness may answer.

A:

That would only mean that there was no physical virginity sir.

Q:

Does it follow doctor, that when the genitalia of a woman admits two fingers with ease does it mean there was previous penetration of male organ?

ATTY. VILLANUEVA:

That is hypothetical scenario, your honor.

COURT:

Witness may answer.

A:

Yes.

Q:

You stated earlier that when you examined the genitalia of JudyLou Verso it admitted two fingers, what could have caused the easiness of admittance?

A:

It can be caused by frequent sexual intercourse or penetration of male organ sir. It could be one possibility.

XXXX XXXX XXXX

CROSS-EXAMINATION

Q:

When the victim was brought to you by the grandmother and the teacher you were already briefed or informed that the precise purpose is for a finding for sexual abuse?

A:

Yes sir.

Q:

You have it in your mind to see and determine that sexual abuse had been committed, it was already in your mind?

A:

Yes sir.

The victim had accident. The victim had self induced (sic) the laceration, sir.

Q:

But it never came into your mind that she was brought to you for examination because of inference or accident met?

A:

No sir.

Q:

Only sexual abuse came into your mind?

A:

No sir.

xxxx xxxx xxxx

Q:

You stated earlier that there was a healed laceration in the vulva and you admitted that it would be of multifarious causes?

A:

Yes sir.

Q:

You did not rule out that it is not only a male organ that can cause laceration in the genitalia?

A:

Yes sir.

Q:

You admitted that there are still other possibilities, that it was not only a male organ that caused the physical laceration you found out in the genitalia of the victim Judylou Verso?

A:

Yes sir.

xxxx xxxx xxxx

Q:

Would it change when the patient got pregnant, when you said that intercourse was one of the possibilities that cause the laceration, in the finding of your examination made on Judylou Verso, will you enlighten us what other possibilities that would cause the same laceration to the victim as young as Judylou Verso?

A:

Insertion of any object 6 to 7 cm produced laceration in the vaginal outlet, any accident that would hit the posterior fourchette near the anus would create laceration, sir.

Q:

How about strenuous activity, would it cause laceration?

A:

No sir.

Q:

So, it is now clear that the examination concluded by you and other examinations conducted by other doctors on other patients are based on hypothetical assumption supported by medical facts?

A:

Yes sir.

Q:

So, your findings is (sic) not entirely accurate, some medical sciences are not exact science?

A:

Yes sir, and human body is an anatomical make up."[31](emphasis ours)

Clearly, the testimony of Dr. Santiago merely provided the possible causes of the laceration. In her direct testimony, Dr. Santiago stated that the cause might be the frequent penetration by the male organ and, in her cross-examination, she stated other causes like accident, self-infliction or penetration of the vagina by an object 6 to 7 cm in size. She never said, in her entire testimony, that the laceration in Judylou's vaginal fourchette was caused by self-infliction, as what the appellant now avers.

What is important in the testimony of Dr. Santiago is that she identified and affirmed[32] the medical certificate she executed on January 23, 1997 and, in that medical certificate, she stated her findings that Judylou's hymen was torn and there was a healed laceration in her posterior vaginal fourchette.[33]

We observe that the appellant gives much emphasis to the alleged admission of Dr. Santiago when the best evidence is the medical certificate she executed. In any case, it must be stated that, in a rape case, what is most important is the credible testimony of the victim. The medical certificate is merely corroborative in nature. The testimony of the victim alone, if credible, is sufficient to convict the accused of the crime.[34]

The appellant next attacks the credibility of the victim by arguing that Judylou just made up the charges against him because she wanted to avenge the bad treatment he had been according her and her younger stepbrother and stepsister. He pointed out the admission of such fact made by Judylou in her cross-examination.

We, however, find that the alleged admission of Judylou was taken out of context. The appellant cannot isolate portions of Judylou's testimony to suit his purpose.

First, we find it highly inconceivable that Judylou, a child 11 years of age,[35] with all her naivete and innocence, will fabricate a story of defloration, allow an examination of her private parts and thereafter submit herself to public trial, gossip or ridicule, if she was not, in fact, a victim of rape and deeply motivated by a sincere desire to have the culprit apprehended and punished.[36] No woman or girl will subject herself to such humiliation just because her stepfather treated her and her younger stepbrother and stepsister badly.

What the appellant fails to realize is that JudyLou was naturally angry with him, not because of the alleged ill-treatment which the defense failed to elaborate on in the first place,[37] but because of the fact that the appellant actually raped the victim not just once but twice. Not only that. The appellant repeatedly[38] threatened the victim, a child of tender years, not to tell anybody or else he would kill her and all the people to whom she divulged the sexual assault. Naturally such child lived in fear and anger. She could be raped by her stepfather anytime in their house and she could not even tell anybody about it.

This is precisely the reason why, on January 23, 1997, JudyLou created a commotion – crying and dragging her table and/or chair, when the accused tried to fetch her from school.[39] JudyLou was fed up with the heavy feeling of fear she had been carrying in her heart for two years. She finally told her teachers about it, and only after some prodding, that fateful afternoon of January 23, 1997.

Thus, when JudyLou admitted, in all honesty, in her cross-examination that she had ill-feelings toward the appellant, that she looked at the appellant as a bad person and she entertained thoughts of vindictiveness against him, we consider that in her favor. She answered all the questions propounded to her honestly and candidly. And so, when asked during her cross-examination if she wanted the appellant to pay for the bad things he had done to them, she naturally said “yes” because she was angry at him for raping her.

Taken therefore in the proper context, JudyLou's ill-feelings are expected, believable and within the realm of human experience.[40] In fact, her spontaneous emotional breakdown towards the end of her narration of the sexual assault completely bolstered her credibility.[41]

From the credible testimony of the victim, the fact of carnal knowledge has been sufficiently established. Carnal knowledge is the single most essential element of statutory rape.[42]

In sum, we find no serious flaw in the testimony of the victim and in the conclusions of the trial court. The mass of physical and testimonial evidence in this case clearly establishes the appellant's guilt.

We now come to the proper penalty to be imposed.

Under RA 7659[43] which amended Article 335 of the Revised Penal Code, the relationship of stepfather and stepdaughter makes the imposition of the death penalty mandatory. RA 7659 provides:

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

- 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."

Since the prosecution was able to sufficiently establish the guilt of the appellant in raping his stepdaughter twice,[44] the penalty of death for each count of rape would have been correctly imposed by the trial court.

However, the prosecution failed to present any independent evidence like the victim's birth certificate or school records to prove that she was a minor (below 18 years of age) when raped by the appellant. The allegation in the informations that the victim was only 9 and 10 years old, respectively, when raped by the appellant in two separate occasions is not sufficient evidence. Nor is the testimony of the victim herself to that effect sufficient evidence of minority. Thus, this Court is constrained to lower the penalty of death imposed by the trial court upon the appellant to reclusion perpetua, in line with recent jurisprudence requiring independent proof of minority of the victim.[45]

We are not unaware of our ruling in *People v. Tipay*,[46] where we ruled that:

"This does not mean however, that the presentation of the certificate of live birth is at all times necessary to prove minority. The minority of a victim of tender age who may be below 10 is quite manifest and the court can take judicial notice thereof."

We hold, however, that the circumstances in that case do not exactly jibe with those in the case at bar.

As to the award of damages, the imposition by the trial court of P75,000 as civil indemnity for each count of rape should be reduced to P50,000 for each count (or a total of P100,000) because the death penalty was not imposed.[47] We also add the award of moral damages in the amount of P50,000 for each count (or a total of P100,000) because the trial court failed to grant one. This is in line with current rulings which automatically grant moral damages in rape cases without need of proof. The reason for this is that the mental, physical and psychological trauma suffered by the victim is too obvious to still require proof at the trial.[48]

WHEREFORE, the decision of the Regional Trial Court of Lucena City, Branch 53, finding the appellant Laurito S. Arriola guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of rape for two counts and sentencing him to suffer the supreme penalty of death for each count and ordering him to pay civil indemnity in the amount of P75,000 for each count is hereby MODIFIED.

The penalty is reduced to reclusion perpetua for each count of rape and the civil indemnity is reduced to P50,000 for each count (or a total of P100,000). The amount of P50,000 for moral damages is also awarded for each count of rape (or a total of P100,000) in line with current jurisprudence.

Costs de officio.

SO ORDERED.

Davide, Jr., C.J., Bellosillo, Vitug, Mendoza, Panganiban, Quisumbing, Ynares-Santiago, Sandoval-Gutierrez, Carpio, Austria-Martinez, Carpio-Morales, and Callejo, Sr., JJ., concur.

Puno, J., on official business.

Azcuna, J., on leave.

[1] Penned by Judge Guillermo R. Andaya; Rollo, pp. 12-19.

[2] Rollo, p. 6.

[3] Rollo, p. 7.

[4] Rollo, pp. 27-30.

[5] Rollo, pp. 18-19.

[6] TSN, September 16, 1997, p. 8.

[7] TSN, September 16, 1997, pp. 4-12.

[8] TSN, September 16, 1997, pp. 12, 16.

[9] Records, p. 4.

[10] TSN, September 29, 1997, p. 1.

[11] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[12] Ibid., pp. 4-5.

- [13] Ibid., p. 5.
- [14] Ibid., p. 5.
- [15] Ibid., pp. 4, 6.
- [16] Ibid., p. 7.
- [17] Ibid., p. 9.
- [18] Ibid., pp. 9-10.
- [19] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
- [20] Ibid., p. 8.
- [21] Ibid., p. 8.
- [22] Ibid., p. 9.
- [23] Ibid., pp. 16-17.
- [24] TSN, September 16, 1997, pp. 4-7.
- [25] TSN, September 29, 1997, p. 11.
- [26] Records, p. 25.
- [27] TSN, June 9, 1999, pp. 5-6.
- [28] RTC Decision; Rollo, p. 6.
- [29] Ibid., Rollo, pp. 18-19.
- [30] Appellant's Brief; Rollo, pp. 53-55.
- [31] TSN, September 16, 1997, pp. 19-29.
- [32] TSN, September 16, 1997, p. 23.
- [33] Records, p. 5.
- [34] *People vs. Julian et. al.*, 270 SCRA 733 (1997).
- [35] TSN, September 29, 1997, p. 1.
- [36] *People vs. Conde*, G.R. No. 138445-50, April 3, 2002, citing *People vs. Dado*, 244 SCRA 655 (1995); *People vs. Portugal*, G.R. No. 143030, March 12, 2002.
- [37] Appellee's Brief; Rollo, p. 14.
- [38] TSN, September 29, 1997, pp. 5, 7-9.
- [39] TSN, September 16, 1997, pp. 4-5; TSN, September 29, 1997, pp. 10-11.
- [40] *People vs. Portugal*, G.R. No. 143030, March 12, 2002, citing *People vs. Lacaba*, 302 SCRA 301 (1999).
- [41] TSN, September 29, 1997, p. 10; *People vs. Marcellana*, G.R. No. 137401-03, February 6, 2002, citing *People vs. Sancha*, 324 SCRA 646, 663 (2000); *People vs. Alquizalas*, 305 SCRA 367, 374 (1999); *People vs. Bea Jr.*, 306 SCRA 653, 659 (1999); *People vs. Ramos*, 312 SCRA 137, 147 (1999); and *People vs. Mosqueda*,

313 SCRA 694, 707 (1999).

[42] In rape cases, the essential element that the prosecution must prove is the absence of the victim's consent to the sexual congress. The prosecution must establish that the sexual assault was committed using force or intimidation, or that it was committed against a woman deprived of reason or otherwise unconscious. On the other hand, in statutory rape or rape of a woman under twelve years of age, all that needs to be proven is that the accused had sexual intercourse with the child - her consent and other circumstances relating to the sexual intercourse being immaterial. See *People vs. Sta. Ana*, 291 SCRA 188 (1998); *People vs. De la Peña*, 276 SCRA 588 (1997).

[43] Entitled "An Act to Impose the Death Penalty on Certain Heinous Crimes Amending for that Purpose the Revised Penal Code, As Amended, Other Special Penal Laws, and For Other Purposes," which took effect on December 31, 1993.

[44] Each and every charge of rape is a separate and distinct crime so that each of them should be proven beyond reasonable doubt. See *People vs. Dulay*, 217 SCRA 132 (1993); *People vs. Baring Jr.*, G.R. No. 137933, Jan. 28, 2002.

[45] *People v. Geraban*, 358 SCRA 213 (2001).

[46] 329 SCRA 52 (2000).

[47] *People vs. Tablon*, G.R. No. 137280, March 14, 2002, citing *People vs. Tahop*, 315 SCRA 465 (1999); *People vs. Robles*, 305 SCRA 273 (1999).

[48] *People vs. Tablon*, G.R. No. 137280, March 14, 2002; *People vs. Villamor*, 297 SCRA 262 (1998); *People vs. Arofo*, G.R. No. 139433, April 11, 2002, citing *People vs. Villanueva*, 339 SCRA 482, 503 (2002) and *People vs. Rebato*, G.R. No. 139552, May 24, 2001.

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