

SECOND DIVISION

[G.R. No. 197815, February 08, 2012]

THE PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, APPELLEE, VS. JULIETO SANCHEZ @ "OMPONG," APPELLANT.

RESOLUTION

BRION, J.:

On appeal is the decision^[1] dated December 22, 2010 of the Court of Appeals (CA) in CA-G.R. CR-H.C. No. 03954, which affirmed with modification the decision^[2] of the Regional Trial Court (RTC), Branch 40, City of Calapan, Oriental Mindoro, in Criminal Case No. C-02-6879. The RTC found Julieta Sanchez @ "Ompong" (*appellant*) guilty beyond reasonable doubt of rape^[3] committed on June 20, 2002 against a ten-year old girl, AAA.^[4]

The Facts

The records show that the 26-year-old appellant accosted AAA while she was on her way home from school. The appellant (who was with a 14-year old co-accused)^[5] gave chase, grabbed AAA, covered her mouth with a handkerchief, and dragged her to a bamboo grove. He then tied AAA's hands and feet with a wire, removed her lower garments, and kicked her hard on her back, causing her to stoop down with her buttocks protruding backward and her hands and knees on the ground.^[6] While AAA was in that position, the appellant removed his lower garments and inserted his private organ into AAA's private organ, causing her pain; thereafter and in the same manner, the minor co-accused likewise had sexual coitus with AAA. With the rape done, the two untied AAA, threatening and warning her at the same time not to disclose the incident.

The next day, AAA confided the sexual assault to her mother when the latter inquired about the bloodstains found on AAA's panty and shorts. Her parents, in turn, reported the incident to the police. AAA was thereafter subjected to physical examination, revealing the presence of several lacerations in her vagina.

In the investigation that followed, AAA positively identified the appellant and his minor co-accused as the perpetrators of the sexual assault. The appellant denied the charge and even denied knowing AAA. He claimed that at the time of the incident, he was at the wake of his grandfather where he spent the night. He disclaimed knowing why AAA filed the case against him.

The RTC found the accused-appellant guilty beyond reasonable doubt of rape. It found AAA's straightforward testimony more credible than the denial and alibi propounded by the accused-appellant. The RTC decreed:

ACCORDINGLY, finding herein accused Julieta Sanchez y Elveza @ "Ompong" guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of Rape punishable under the first paragraph of Article 266-A of the Revised Penal Code, said accused is hereby sentenced to suffer the penalty of **RECLUSION PERPETUA** with all the accessory penalties as provided for by law.

Said accused is hereby sentenced to indemnify the private complainant [AAA] the amount of P100,000.00 as civil indemnity and the amount of P75,000.00 as moral and exemplary damages.

SO ORDERED.^[7] (emphasis supplied)

The appellant appealed his conviction to the CA which agreed with the RTC on the appellant's guilt of the crime charged. However, the CA modified the RTC's decision by reducing the amounts of civil indemnity and moral damages to P50,000.00 each, and deleting the award of exemplary damages.^[8]

The Issue

The sole issue is whether the guilt of the appellant has been proven beyond reasonable doubt.^[9] The appellant argues that: (1) AAA's testimony suffered from serious flaws and contradictions, rendering it doubtful; (2) there was evidence that another person committed the crime; and (3) he has a strong alibi.

The Court's Ruling

We find no reason to reverse the conviction of the appellant.

The Court is guided by the following jurisprudence when confronted with the issue of credibility of witnesses on appeal:

First, the Court gives the highest respect to the RTC's evaluation of the testimony of the witnesses, considering its unique position in directly observing the demeanor of a witness on the stand. From its vantage point, the trial court is in the best position to determine the truthfulness of witnesses.^[10]

Second, absent any substantial reason which would justify the reversal of the RTC's assessments and conclusions, the reviewing court is generally bound by the lower court's findings, particularly when no significant facts and circumstances, affecting the outcome of the case, are shown to have been overlooked or disregarded.^[11]

And third, the rule is even more stringently applied if the CA concurred with the RTC.^[12]

In this case, both the RTC and the CA found AAA and her testimony credible. Our own independent examination of the records leads us to arrive at the same conclusion. AAA's testimony relating to the identity of the appellant as the perpetrator was firm and categorical. Her testimony on the details of the rape which established all its elements - namely, the carnal knowledge, the force and