

THIRD DIVISION

[G.R. No. 141631, April 04, 2003]

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, APPELLEE, VS. FERDINAND FRANCISCO, APPELLANT.

D E C I S I O N

CORONA, J.:

This is an appeal from the decision^[1] dated May 7, 1999 of the Regional Trial Court of Agoo, La Union, Branch 31, finding herein appellant, Ferdinand Francisco, guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of rape and sentencing him to suffer the penalty of *reclusion perpetua* and to pay a fine of P50,000 and attorney's fees in the amount of P10,000.

Based on a criminal complaint filed by private complainant AAA (AAA, for brevity), appellant was charged on May 11, 1995 with the crime of rape in an information that read:

The undersigned Assistant Provincial Prosecutor, on the basis of the sworn criminal complaint filed before the Office of the Provincial Prosecutor, Agoo Branch, Agoo, La Union, by the offended party AAA assisted by [REDACTED] which criminal complaint is hereby made as an integral part hereof, accuses FERDINAND FRANCISCO of the crime of RAPE, committed as follows:

That on or about the month of May 1994, in the Municipality of [REDACTED], Province of [REDACTED], Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, with lewd design, did then and there, by means of force and intimidation and against the will and consent of the aforementioned offended woman AAA, willfully, unlawfully and feloniously have (sic) carnal knowledge of the latter, to her damage and prejudice.

Contrary to law.^[2]

During appellant's arraignment on July 17, 1995, he pleaded not guilty.

Appellant filed a petition for bail on the ground that the evidence against him was not strong. After conducting a hearing, the trial court issued a resolution^[3] dated January 21, 1998 denying the petition for bail.

The evidence of the prosecution shows that, at the time of the rape, AAA was a 27-year-old mother of four. Inasmuch as she did not even finish Grade 1, she does not know how to read and write.^[4]

In the morning of May 7, 1994, AAA was gathering *baguio* beans in her garden in the mountain of [REDACTED], together with her 7-year-old son whom she left to sleep in a bamboo bed. She claimed that appellant came from behind, suddenly grabbed her with his left hand and punched her in the abdomen with his right hand rendering her unconscious.^[5] Upon regaining consciousness, she noticed that she was no longer wearing her pants and panty. The appellant was seated beside her. She felt pain in her buttocks and thighs, and noticed that her vagina was wet and slippery due to the white substance oozing from her buttocks. Appellant threatened to kill her and her entire family if she revealed the incident to her husband.^[6] The appellant then left. When she and her son were on their way home, she noticed that blood was flowing down her thighs. She realized that she was suffering a miscarriage since she was then pregnant.

AAA told [REDACTED], her husband, only about the miscarriage but not about the rape because of the threats made by appellant.

In the early morning of November 2, 1994, AAA was awakened from her sleep by someone outside the house trying to open the door. [REDACTED] saw and recognized the intruder as herein appellant. When [REDACTED] shouted at appellant, the latter hurriedly left. AAA cried and asked for help while [REDACTED] started shouting outside. When [REDACTED] saw AAA crying, she narrated to him the rape that occurred on May 7, 1994. Her husband cried after hearing her story.^[7]

That same day, AAA and [REDACTED] went to the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI, for brevity) to report the crime.^[8] She executed a sworn statement and, the next day, subjected herself to a medical examination conducted by Dr. Arturo Llavore.^[9] During her medical examination, Dr. Llavore asked her why she reported the rape incident only after six months from its commission. She replied that she was afraid of the death threats made by appellant.^[10]

AAA testified that she suffered mental anguish due to this incident.

For his defense, appellant denied the charges, invoked that he and AAA were lovers and tried to discredit her testimony by pointing out the delay in, and her ill-motives for, filing the case.

Appellant testified that AAA is his cousin-in-law, [REDACTED] being his first cousin. He denied raping her on May 7, 1994.^[11] Instead, he claimed that he began a secret love affair with her sometime in April, 1994 when she went to his house to ask him to testify in a criminal case involving the murder of her father. In exchange for this favor, AAA offered to have sexual intercourse with appellant. Appellant refused but, just the same, she still desired to make love to him. Appellant acceded and they had sexual intercourse in his house.^[12] They again had sexual intercourse at the Pugo Cemetery at about 11:00 a.m. also in April, 1994.^[13]

During the barangay elections on May 9, 1994, or two days after the alleged rape incident, AAA and [REDACTED] went to appellant's house to invite the latter to be an official watcher of [REDACTED] who was then campaigning for the position of barangay kagawad. Appellant agreed. In the morning of election day, appellant went to Precinct 16, Barrio Palina, Pugo, La Union, and acted as the official watcher of

██████████. AAA even brought him food for lunch.^[14] To support his claim, appellant presented the minutes of the voting and counting of votes which showed his handwritten name and his designation as the watcher of ██████████. Although Araceli Suyat (Acting Election Registrar) and Yolanda Queral (Chairman of Precinct 16, Barrio Palina, Pugo, La Union) testified on the authenticity of the document, they told the court that they did not know appellant personally.^[15]

Lorna Francisco, the appellant's wife, corroborated her husband's testimony. She also went to the polling place, voted and gave appellant his lunch.^[16]

Pablito Francisco, the father of appellant, testified that, after the election, AAA and ██████████ went to the house he (Pablito) was renting. They asked Pablito to let their son live with him considering that his house was near Pugo Catholic School, the school where their son was studying. Her son stayed with appellant's father from June up to November, 1994. During that short period of time, AAA visited her son and brought him food once a week. During her visits, Pablito did not notice anything unusual in her. In one instance even, AAA, appellant and Lorna Francisco (appellant's wife) met by chance at his house where they cooked and ate together.^[17] Lorna Francisco corroborated Pablito's testimony and added that, prior to the filing of the case, their relationship with private complainant went along fine.^[18]

In response to the allegation that he attempted to surreptitiously enter AAA's house, appellant testified that, on November 1, 1994, AAA told him to go to her house the next morning as ██████████ would not be around. At about 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. on November 2, 1994, appellant went to AAA's house but when he saw ██████████ at the gate, he went away.^[19] It was only on November 2, 1994 that the charge of rape was filed because it was only on that day that ██████████ found out about their extra-marital affair. According to appellant, AAA herself revealed their illicit relationship to her husband.^[20]

After the defense offered its evidence, the prosecution again presented AAA to rebut the testimonies of the defense witnesses. She denied all the details of appellant's testimony, specially his claim that they were maintaining an illicit love affair. She denied engaging in consensual sexual relations with appellant. She denied ever going to appellant's house to convince him to testify in the criminal case involving her father's murder by offering sexual intercourse in return. Crying, she explained that she would not stoop so low as to sacrifice her and her family's honor despite their poverty.^[21]

AAA belied the testimonies of the defense witnesses that she went with her husband to convince appellant to be her husband's election watcher. She further testified that she never brought appellant food on election day considering that she was at home still bleeding as a result of the miscarriage; that she never went to Pablito's residence to bring food to her son; and that she never cooked and ate lunch with Lorna Francisco and appellant in Pablito's residence. She clarified that it was her younger brother and her husband who brought food to her son in Pablito's house every Sunday afternoon. She never went there because she was afraid of appellant.^[22]

On May 7, 1999, the trial court rendered a decision convicting appellant of the crime of rape. The dispositive portion of the decision read:

WHEREFORE, this Court finds accused FERDINAND FRANCISCO guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of Rape and is hereby sentenced to RECLUSION PERPETUA. He is also ordered to pay damages in the amount of FIFTY THOUSAND PESOS (P50,000.00) to AAA as indemnity and to pay the attorney's fees of the Private Prosecutor in the amount of TEN THOUSAND PESOS. (P10,000.00).

SO ORDERED.^[23]

In finding appellant guilty of the crime of rape, the trial court relied heavily on the credibility of AAA's testimony and held that:

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The Judge of this Court believed her. Her answers to questions were straightforward. In sum, her story was unswerving and plain. The Judge of this Court was looking for something in her that would give her away if she was just acting her part but there was none. When she cried and wiped away the tears, the Defense Counsel derided the tears as crocodile's tears. The Court does not agree. They were real tears. The could only well in someone's eyes by a chemistry that is hard to explain but all the same they came out because of genuine emotions, a finding and a conclusion that can only be made by someone who had been in the battlefield called courtroom for 20 years.

The other points raised by the Defense that the rape charge was a concoction what with the asseverations by the Defense that accused was a watcher of private complainant's husband on May 9, 1994 when said husband ran for punong barangay, that private complainant's son, Raul, was lodged at accused's father's place when said son was studying in the town, that private complainant brought food for the watchers which included accused during the election day for punong barangay on May 1, 1994 et cetera are considered by this Court as peripheral defenses that do not necessarily rule out the commission of rape precisely because of fear.

If this rape was untrue, AAA could have easily hid this incident for anyway the accused is a relative of her husband. This incident could have been easily patched up by the elders so as to eschew public embarrassment but still she chose to pursue this case and consequently, as the Supreme Court said in the case of People v. Borce, G.R. No. 124131, April 22, 1998, opened "herself and her family to public scrutiny and embarrassment, let alone send an innocent man possibly to the gallows for no strong reason at all".

Also, the theory of the accused that this rape case was filed or initiated sometime in November 1994 because the accused did not want to be a witness for the prosecution in the case of People v. Nalica, et. al. has no foundation because by that time in November 1994, two persons

emerged to be witnesses for the prosecution, who in fact executed their Sworn Statements on May 10, 1994. They were Hipolito Saoyao and Marcelino Vilorio. This Court was the court that tried the case of murder wherein private complainant's father was murdered in 1984, but which case was filed only in 1994 when two persons, after (10) years, emerged to testify.

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Hence, this appeal on the following assignment of errors:

I

THE COURT A QUO ERRED IN FINDING THAT THE COMPLAINANT FEARED FOR HER LIFE, HUSBAND (SIC) AND OTHER MEMBERS OF HER FAMILY (SIC) IN REPORTING THE INCIDENT TO ANY MEMBERS OF HER FAMILY, BARANGAY OFFICERS AND OTHER POLICE AUTHORITIES FOR A PERIOD OF SIX MONTHS (FROM MAY 7, 1994 TO NOVEMBER 2, 1994).

II

THE LOWER COURT ERRED IN CONVICTING THE ACCUSED.^[24]

We affirm appellant's conviction.

Appellant's defense is anchored to impugning the credibility of private complainant by invoking "the sweetheart theory." It is supported by a general denial of the accusation that he raped AAA on May 7, 1994.

Appellant capitalizes on the fact that private complainant allowed six months from May 7, 1994 (the date of the rape) to elapse before she filed the complaint. We have ruled that delay in making a criminal accusation does not impair the credibility of a witness if such delay is satisfactorily explained.^[25] Appellant maintains that AAA did not give a satisfactory explanation for the delay in the filing of the criminal complaint.

According to AAA, she did not immediately file the case because she was afraid of appellant's threats. Appellant, however, questioned the existence of fear by pointing out the following circumstances: (1) although appellant lived 3 kilometers away from AAA's house, she did not report the crime to the police authorities or to the barangay officials; (2) she also failed to disclose the rape incident to her mother and siblings despite the fact that they were neighbors and they often conversed with each other; and (3) she frequently visited her son who resided in the house of appellant's father and, at one time, even dined with appellant and his wife.

The issue raised in the first assignment of error questions the credibility of AAA and the appreciation of facts by the trial court. Well-entrenched is the rule that the factual findings of the trial court, especially on the credibility of witnesses, are accorded great weight and respect and will not be disturbed on appeal. This is so because the trial court had the advantage of observing the witnesses through the different indicators of truthfulness or falsehood, such as the angry flush of an insisted assertion, the sudden pallor of a discovered lie, the tremulous mutter of a