

Republic of the Philippines
SUPREME COURT
Manila

THIRD DIVISION

G.R. No. 193707 December 10, 2014

NORMA A. DEL SOCORRO, for and in behalf of her minor child RODERIGO NORJO VAN WILSEM, Petitioner,
vs.
ERNST JOHAN BRINKMAN VAN WILSEM, Respondent.

D E C I S I O N

PERALTA, J.:

Before the Court is a petition for review on certiorari under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court seeking to reverse and set aside the Orders¹ dated February 19, 2010 and September 1, 2010, respectively, of the Regional Trial Court of Cebu City (RTC-Cebu), which dismissed the criminal case entitled *People of the Philippines v. Ernst Johan Brinkman Van Wilsem*, docketed as Criminal Case No. CBU-85503, for violation of Republic Act (R.A.) No. 9262, otherwise known as the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004.

The following facts are culled from the records:

Petitioner Norma A. Del Socorro and respondent Ernst Johan Brinkman Van Wilsem contracted marriage in Holland on September 25, 1990.² On January 19, 1994, they were blessed with a son named Roderigo Norjo Van Wilsem, who at the time of the filing of the instant petition was sixteen (16) years of age.³

Unfortunately, their marriage bond ended on July 19, 1995 by virtue of a Divorce Decree issued by the appropriate Court of Holland.⁴ At that time, their son was only eighteen (18) months old.⁵ Thereafter, petitioner and her son came home to the Philippines.⁶

According to petitioner, respondent made a promise to provide monthly support to their son in the amount of Two Hundred Fifty (250) Guildene (which is equivalent to Php17,500.00 more or less).⁷ However, since the arrival of petitioner and her son in the Philippines, respondent never gave support to the son, Roderigo.⁸

Not long thereafter, respondent came to the Philippines and remarried in Pinamungahan, Cebu, and since then, have been residing thereat.⁹ Respondent and his new wife established a business known as Paree Catering, located at Barangay Tajao, Municipality of Pinamungahan, Cebu City.¹⁰ To date, all the parties, including their son, Roderigo, are presently living in Cebu City.¹¹

On August 28, 2009, petitioner, through her counsel, sent a letter demanding for support from respondent. However, respondent refused to receive the letter.¹²

Because of the foregoing circumstances, petitioner filed a complaint affidavit with the Provincial Prosecutor of Cebu City against respondent for violation of Section 5, paragraph E(2) of R.A. No. 9262 for the latter's unjust refusal to support his minor child with petitioner.¹³ Respondent submitted his counter-affidavit thereto, to which petitioner also submitted her reply-affidavit.¹⁴ Thereafter, the Provincial Prosecutor of Cebu City issued a Resolution recommending the filing of an information for the crime charged against herein respondent.

The information, which was filed with the RTC-Cebu and raffled to Branch 20 thereof, states that:

That sometime in the year 1995 and up to the present, more or less, in the Municipality of Minglanilla, Province of Cebu, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, did then and there wilfully, unlawfully and deliberately deprive, refuse and still continue to deprive his son RODERIGO NORJO VAN WILSEM, a fourteen (14) year old minor, of financial support legally due him, resulting in economic abuse to the victim. CONTRARY TO LAW.¹⁵

Upon motion and after notice and hearing, the RTC-Cebu issued a Hold Departure Order against respondent.¹⁶ Consequently, respondent was arrested and, subsequently, posted bail.¹⁷ Petitioner also filed a Motion/Application of Permanent Protection Order to which respondent filed his Opposition.¹⁸ Pending the resolution thereof,

respondent was arraigned.¹⁹ Subsequently, without the RTC-Cebu having resolved the application of the protection order, respondent filed a Motion to Dismiss on the ground of: (1) lack of jurisdiction over the offense charged; and (2) prescription of the crime charged.²⁰

On February 19, 2010, the RTC-Cebu issued the herein assailed Order,²¹ dismissing the instant criminal case against respondent on the ground that the facts charged in the information do not constitute an offense with respect to the respondent who is an alien, the dispositive part of which states:

WHEREFORE, the Court finds that the facts charged in the information do not constitute an offense with respect to the accused, he being an alien, and accordingly, orders this case DISMISSED.

The bail bond posted by accused Ernst Johan Brinkman Van Wilsem for his provisional liberty is hereby cancelled (sic) and ordered released.

SO ORDERED.

Cebu City, Philippines, February 19, 2010.²²

Thereafter, petitioner filed her Motion for Reconsideration thereto reiterating respondent's obligation to support their child under Article 195²³ of the Family Code, thus, failure to do so makes him liable under R.A. No. 9262 which "equally applies to all persons in the Philippines who are obliged to support their minor children regardless of the obligor's nationality."²⁴

On September 1, 2010, the lower court issued an Order²⁵ denying petitioner's Motion for Reconsideration and reiterating its previous ruling. Thus:

x x x The arguments therein presented are basically a rehash of those advanced earlier in the memorandum of the prosecution. Thus, the court hereby reiterates its ruling that since the accused is a foreign national he is not subject to our national law (The Family Code) in regard to a parent's duty and obligation to give support to his child. Consequently, he cannot be charged of violating R.A. 9262 for his alleged failure to support his child. Unless it is conclusively established that R.A. 9262 applies to a foreigner who fails to give support to his child, notwithstanding that he is not bound by our domestic law which mandates a parent to give such support, it is the considered opinion of the court that no prima facie case exists against the accused herein, hence, the case should be dismissed.

WHEREFORE, the motion for reconsideration is hereby DENIED for lack of merit.

SO ORDERED.

Cebu City, Philippines, September 1, 2010.²⁶

Hence, the present Petition for Review on Certiorari raising the following issues:

1. Whether or not a foreign national has an obligation to support his minor child under Philippine law; and
2. Whether or not a foreign national can be held criminally liable under R.A. No. 9262 for his unjustified failure to support his minor child.²⁷

At the outset, let it be emphasized that We are taking cognizance of the instant petition despite the fact that the same was directly lodged with the Supreme Court, consistent with the ruling in *Republic v. Sunvar Realty Development Corporation*,²⁸ which lays down the instances when a ruling of the trial court may be brought on appeal directly to the Supreme Court without violating the doctrine of hierarchy of courts, to wit:

x x x Nevertheless, the Rules do not prohibit any of the parties from filing a Rule 45 Petition with this Court, in case only questions of law are raised or involved. This latter situation was one that petitioners found themselves in when they filed the instant Petition to raise only questions of law. In *Republic v. Malabanan*, the Court clarified the three modes of appeal from decisions of the RTC, to wit: (1) by ordinary appeal or appeal by writ of error under Rule 41, whereby judgment was rendered in a civil or criminal action by the RTC in the exercise of its original jurisdiction; (2) by a petition for review under Rule 42, whereby judgment was rendered by the RTC in the exercise of its appellate jurisdiction; and (3) by a petition for review on certiorari before the Supreme Court under Rule 45. "The first mode of appeal is taken to the [Court of Appeals] on questions of fact or mixed questions of fact and law. The second mode of appeal is brought to the CA on questions of fact, of law, or mixed questions of fact and law. The third mode of appeal is elevated to the Supreme Court only on questions of law." (Emphasis supplied)

There is a question of law when the issue does not call for an examination of the probative value of the evidence presented or of the truth or falsehood of the facts being admitted, and the doubt concerns the correct application of law and jurisprudence on the matter. The resolution of the issue must rest solely on what the law provides on the given set of circumstances.²⁹

Indeed, the issues submitted to us for resolution involve questions of law – the response thereto concerns the correct application of law and jurisprudence on a given set of facts, i.e., whether or not a foreign national has an

obligation to support his minor child under Philippine law; and whether or not he can be held criminally liable under R.A. No. 9262 for his unjustified failure to do so.

It cannot be negated, moreover, that the instant petition highlights a novel question of law concerning the liability of a foreign national who allegedly commits acts and omissions punishable under special criminal laws, specifically in relation to family rights and duties. The inimitability of the factual milieu of the present case, therefore, deserves a definitive ruling by this Court, which will eventually serve as a guidepost for future cases. Furthermore, dismissing the instant petition and remanding the same to the CA would only waste the time, effort and resources of the courts. Thus, in the present case, considerations of efficiency and economy in the administration of justice should prevail over the observance of the hierarchy of courts.

Now, on the matter of the substantive issues, We find the petition meritorious. Nonetheless, we do not fully agree with petitioner's contentions.

To determine whether or not a person is criminally liable under R.A. No. 9262, it is imperative that the legal obligation to support exists.

Petitioner invokes Article 195³⁰ of the Family Code, which provides the parent's obligation to support his child. Petitioner contends that notwithstanding the existence of a divorce decree issued in relation to Article 26 of the Family Code,³¹ respondent is not excused from complying with his obligation to support his minor child with petitioner.

On the other hand, respondent contends that there is no sufficient and clear basis presented by petitioner that she, as well as her minor son, are entitled to financial support.³² Respondent also added that by reason of the Divorce Decree, he is not obligated to petitioner for any financial support.³³

On this point, we agree with respondent that petitioner cannot rely on Article 195³⁴ of the New Civil Code in demanding support from respondent, who is a foreign citizen, since Article 15³⁵ of the New Civil Code stresses the principle of nationality. In other words, insofar as Philippine laws are concerned, specifically the provisions of the Family Code on support, the same only applies to Filipino citizens. By analogy, the same principle applies to foreigners such that they are governed by their national law with respect to family rights and duties.³⁶

The obligation to give support to a child is a matter that falls under family rights and duties. Since the respondent is a citizen of Holland or the Netherlands, we agree with the RTC-Cebu that he is subject to the laws of his country, not to Philippine law, as to whether he is obliged to give support to his child, as well as the consequences of his failure to do so.³⁷

In the case of *Vivo v. Cloribel*,³⁸ the Court held that –

Furthermore, being still aliens, they are not in position to invoke the provisions of the Civil Code of the Philippines, for that Code cleaves to the principle that family rights and duties are governed by their personal law, i.e., the laws of the nation to which they belong even when staying in a foreign country (cf. Civil Code, Article 15).³⁹

It cannot be gainsaid, therefore, that the respondent is not obliged to support petitioner's son under Article 195 of the Family Code as a consequence of the Divorce Covenant obtained in Holland. This does not, however, mean that respondent is not obliged to support petitioner's son altogether.

In international law, the party who wants to have a foreign law applied to a dispute or case has the burden of proving the foreign law.⁴⁰ In the present case, respondent hastily concludes that being a national of the Netherlands, he is governed by such laws on the matter of provision of and capacity to support.⁴¹ While respondent pleaded the laws of the Netherlands in advancing his position that he is not obliged to support his son, he never proved the same.

It is incumbent upon respondent to plead and prove that the national law of the Netherlands does not impose upon the parents the obligation to support their child (either before, during or after the issuance of a divorce decree), because *Llorente v. Court of Appeals*,⁴² has already enunciated that:

True, foreign laws do not prove themselves in our jurisdiction and our courts are not authorized to take judicial notice of them. Like any other fact, they must be alleged and proved.⁴³

In view of respondent's failure to prove the national law of the Netherlands in his favor, the doctrine of processual presumption shall govern. Under this doctrine, if the foreign law involved is not properly pleaded and proved, our courts will presume that the foreign law is the same as our local or domestic or internal law.⁴⁴ Thus, since the law of the Netherlands as regards the obligation to support has not been properly pleaded and proved in the instant case, it is presumed to be the same with Philippine law, which enforces the obligation of parents to support their children and penalizing the non-compliance therewith.

Moreover, while in *Pilapil v. Ibay-Somera*,⁴⁵ the Court held that a divorce obtained in a foreign land as well as its legal effects may be recognized in the Philippines in view of the nationality principle on the matter of status of persons, the Divorce Covenant presented by respondent does not completely show that he is not liable to give support to his son after the divorce decree was issued. Emphasis is placed on petitioner's allegation that under the

second page of the aforesaid covenant, respondent's obligation to support his child is specifically stated,⁴⁶ which was not disputed by respondent.

We likewise agree with petitioner that notwithstanding that the national law of respondent states that parents have no obligation to support their children or that such obligation is not punishable by law, said law would still not find applicability, in light of the ruling in *Bank of America, NT and SA v. American Realty Corporation*,⁴⁷ to wit:

In the instant case, assuming arguendo that the English Law on the matter were properly pleaded and proved in accordance with Section 24, Rule 132 of the Rules of Court and the jurisprudence laid down in *Yao Kee, et al. vs. Sy-Gonzales*, said foreign law would still not find applicability.

Thus, when the foreign law, judgment or contract is contrary to a sound and established public policy of the forum, the said foreign law, judgment or order shall not be applied.

Additionally, prohibitive laws concerning persons, their acts or property, and those which have for their object public order, public policy and good customs shall not be rendered ineffective by laws or judgments promulgated, or by determinations or conventions agreed upon in a foreign country.

The public policy sought to be protected in the instant case is the principle imbedded in our jurisdiction proscribing the splitting up of a single cause of action.

Section 4, Rule 2 of the 1997 Rules of Civil Procedure is pertinent

—

If two or more suits are instituted on the basis of the same cause of action, the filing of one or a judgment upon the merits in any one is available as a ground for the dismissal of the others. Moreover, foreign law should not be applied when its application would work undeniable injustice to the citizens or residents of the forum. To give justice is the most important function of law; hence, a law, or judgment or contract that is obviously unjust negates the fundamental principles of Conflict of Laws.⁴⁸

Applying the foregoing, even if the laws of the Netherlands neither enforce a parent's obligation to support his child nor penalize the noncompliance therewith, such obligation is still duly enforceable in the Philippines because it would be of great injustice to the child to be denied of financial support when the latter is entitled thereto.

We emphasize, however, that as to petitioner herself, respondent is no longer liable to support his former wife, in consonance with the ruling in *San Luis v. San Luis*,⁴⁹ to wit:

As to the effect of the divorce on the Filipino wife, the Court ruled that she should no longer be considered married to the alien spouse. Further, she should not be required to perform her marital duties and obligations. It held:

To maintain, as private respondent does, that, under our laws, petitioner has to be considered still married to private respondent and still subject to a wife's obligations under Article 109, et. seq. of the Civil Code cannot be just. Petitioner should not be obliged to live together with, observe respect and fidelity, and render support to private respondent. The latter should not continue to be one of her heirs with possible rights to conjugal property. She should not be discriminated against in her own country if the ends of justice are to be served. (Emphasis added)⁵⁰

Based on the foregoing legal precepts, we find that respondent may be made liable under Section 5(e) and (i) of R.A. No. 9262 for unjustly refusing or failing to give support to petitioner's son, to wit:

SECTION 5. Acts of Violence Against Women and Their Children.- The crime of violence against women and their children is committed through any of the following acts:

X X X X

(e) Attempting to compel or compelling the woman or her child to engage in conduct which the woman or her child has the right to desist from or desist from conduct which the woman or her child has the right to engage in, or attempting to restrict or restricting the woman's or her child's freedom of movement or conduct by force or threat of force, physical or other harm or threat of physical or other harm, or intimidation directed against the woman or child. This shall include, but not limited to, the following acts committed with the purpose or effect of controlling or restricting the woman's or her child's movement or conduct:

X X X X

(2) Depriving or threatening to deprive the woman or her children of financial support legally due her or her family, or deliberately providing the woman's children insufficient financial support; X X X X

(i) Causing mental or emotional anguish, public ridicule or humiliation to the woman or her child, including, but not limited to, repeated verbal and emotional abuse, and denial of financial support or custody of minor children or of access to the woman's child/children.⁵¹

Under the aforesaid special law, the deprivation or denial of financial support to the child is considered an act of violence against women and children.

In addition, considering that respondent is currently living in the Philippines, we find strength in petitioner's claim that the Territoriality Principle in criminal law, in relation to Article 14 of the New Civil Code, applies to the instant case, which provides that: "[p]enal laws and those of public security and safety shall be obligatory upon all who live and sojourn in Philippine territory, subject to the principle of public international law and to treaty stipulations." On this score, it is indisputable that the alleged continuing acts of respondent in refusing to support his child with petitioner is committed here in the Philippines as all of the parties herein are residents of the Province of Cebu City. As such, our courts have territorial jurisdiction over the offense charged against respondent. It is likewise irrefutable that jurisdiction over the respondent was acquired upon his arrest.

Finally, we do not agree with respondent's argument that granting, but not admitting, that there is a legal basis for charging violation of R.A. No. 9262 in the instant case, the criminal liability has been extinguished on the ground of prescription of crime⁵² under Section 24 of R.A. No. 9262, which provides that:

SECTION 24. Prescriptive Period. – Acts falling under Sections 5(a) to 5(f) shall prescribe in twenty (20) years. Acts falling under Sections 5(g) to 5(l) shall prescribe in ten (10) years.

The act of denying support to a child under Section 5(e)(2) and (i) of R.A. No. 9262 is a continuing offense,⁵³ which started in 1995 but is still ongoing at present. Accordingly, the crime charged in the instant case has clearly not prescribed.

Given, however, that the issue on whether respondent has provided support to petitioner's child calls for an examination of the probative value of the evidence presented, and the truth and falsehood of facts being admitted, we hereby remand the determination of this issue to the RTC-Cebu which has jurisdiction over the case.

WHEREFORE, the petition is GRANTED. The Orders dated February 19, 2010 and September 1, 2010, respectively, of the Regional Trial Court of the City of Cebu are hereby REVERSED and SET ASIDE. The case is REMANDED to the same court to conduct further proceedings based on the merits of the case.

SO ORDERED.

DIOSDADO M. PERALTA

Associate Justice

WE CONCUR:

PRESBITERO J. VELASCO, JR.

Associate Justice

Chairperson

MARTIN S. VILLARAMA, JR.

Associate Justice

JOSE CATRAL MENDOZA*

Associate Justice

BIENVENIDO L. REYES

Associate Justice

A T T E S T A T I O N

I attest that the conclusions in the above Decision had been reached in consultation before the case was assigned to the writer of the opinion of the Court's Division.

PRESBITERO J. VELASCO, JR.

Associate Justice

Chairperson, Third Division

C E R T I F I C A T I O N

Pursuant to Section 13, Article VIII of the Constitution and the Division Chairperson's Attestation, I certify that the conclusions in the above Decision had been reached in consultation before the case was assigned to the writer of the opinion of the Court's Division.

MARIA LOURDES P.A. SERENO

Chief Justice

Footnotes

¹ Penned by Judge Bienvenido R. Saniel, Jr.; Annexes "A" and "B" to Petition, respectively, rollo, pp. 22-26.

² Rollo, p. 6.

³ Id.

⁴ Id. at 7.

⁵ Annex "F" to Petition, rollo, p. 31.

⁶ Id. at 32.

⁷ Annex "A" to Petition, rollo, pp. 23-24.

⁸ Id. at 24.

⁹ Id. at 32.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Supra note 7, at 23-24.

¹² Supra note 5, at 32.

¹³ Rollo, p. 7.

¹⁴ Id.

¹⁵ Id. at 22.

¹⁶ Id.

¹⁷ Id. at 24.

¹⁸ Id. at 8.

¹⁹ Id.

²⁰ Id.

²¹ Supra note 7.

²² Id. at 24.

²³ Art. 195. Subject to the provisions of the succeeding articles, the following are obliged to support each other to the whole extent set forth in the preceding article:

(1) The spouses;

(2) Legitimate ascendants and descendants;

(3) Parents and their legitimate children and the legitimate and illegitimate children of the latter;

(4) Parents and their illegitimate children and the legitimate and illegitimate children of the latter; and

(5) Legitimate brothers and sisters, whether of full or half-blood.

²⁴ Annex "R" to Petition, rollo, p. 102.

²⁵ Annex "B" to Petition, id. at 25.

²⁶ Id.

²⁷ Rollo, p. 10.

²⁸ G.R. No. 194880, June 20, 2012, 674 SCRA 320.

²⁹ Id. at 332-333.

³⁰ Supra note 23.

³¹ Art. 26. All marriages solemnized outside the Philippines, in accordance with the laws in force in the country where they were solemnized, and valid there as such, shall also be valid in this country, except those prohibited under Articles 35 (1), (4), (5) and (6), 3637 and 38.

Where a marriage between a Filipino citizen and a foreigner is validly celebrated and a divorce is thereafter validly obtained abroad by the alien spouse capacitating him or her to remarry, the Filipino spouse shall have capacity to remarry under Philippine law. (As amended by Executive Order 227)

³² Comment on the Petition for Review on Certiorari, rollo, p. 123.

³³ Id. at 122.

³⁴ Supra note 23.

³⁵ Art. 15. Laws relating to family rights and duties, or to the status, condition and legal capacity of persons are binding upon citizens of the Philippines, even though living abroad.

³⁶ Supra note 7, at 24.

³⁷ Id.

³⁸ G.R. No. L-25441, October 26, 1968, 25 SCRA 616.

³⁹ Id. at 625-626. (Emphasis supplied)

⁴⁰ EDI-Staff builders International, Inc. v. NLRC, 563 Phil. 1, 22 (2007).

⁴¹ Annex "N" to Petition, rollo, p. 84.

⁴² 399 Phil. 342 (2000).

⁴³ Id. at 354. (Emphasis supplied)

⁴⁴ Bank of America, NT and SA v. American Realty Corporation, 378 Phil. 1279, 1296 (1999).

⁴⁵ G.R. No. 80116, June 30, 1989, 174 SCRA 653.

⁴⁶ Rollo, p. 18.

⁴⁷ Supra note 44.

⁴⁸ Id. at 1296-1297. (Emphasis supplied)

⁴⁹ 543 Phil. 275 (2007).

⁵⁰ Id. at 290.

⁵¹ Section 5(e) and (i) of R.A. No. 9262. (Emphasis supplied)

⁵² Rollo, p. 15.

⁵³ In *People v. De Leon*, 608 Phil. 701, 722 (2009), it was held that:

A continued (continuous or continuing) crime is defined as a single crime, consisting of a series of acts but all arising from one criminal resolution. Although there is a series of acts, there is only one crime committed; hence, only one penalty shall be imposed.