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SECOND DIVISION

[G.R. No. L-42337. October 9, 1978]

ROSITA S. SUARNABA, *petitioner, vs.* **WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION COMMISSION and CLAVECILLA RADIO SYSTEM,** *respondents.*

SYLLABUS

1. **LABOR AND SOCIAL LEGISLATION; WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION COMMISSION; BENEFICIARIES; EFFECT OF ADMISSION ON EMPLOYER'S REPORT AS TO CLAIMANT'S STATUS.** — Where the Employers Report of Accident and sickness stated that the claimant is the wife and one of the dependents of the deceased employee, the claimant's status as the legal wife of the latter may be considered duly established without the need for further proof since the Employers Report serves as an answer. Where it appears that the "Employers Report of Accident and Sickness" stated that claimant is the wife and one of the dependents of the deceased employee; that claimant filed the "Notice and Claim for Compensation and Death Benefits" as the wife of the deceased employee; that the Certificate of Death" mentions claimant as the surviving spouse; that during the hearing an affidavit was submitted to the effect that claimant was living with the deceased and that she used to collect his salary from the employer; and that the Commission itself held that the Parish Certificate was "a proof of the solemnization of their marriage sacrament," all these, along with the presumption that "a man and a woman deporting themselves as husband and wife have entered into a lawful contract of marriage, clearly show that claimant is the legal wife of the deceased employee, and therefore, her claim to compensation benefits as legal wife and dependent of said deceased should be approved.

2. **ID.; ID.; ID.; ID.; CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE, NOT REQUIRED.** — It is error for the Workmen's Compensation Commission to insist that the legal relationship between claimant and the deceased employee should be established by a conclusive evidence, and to deny the claim for compensation by a widow who, through no fault of her own, cannot produce the primary evidence of

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marriage or secure witnesses to the marriage. This is clearly violative of the fundamental precept enshrined in the rules of the Workmen's Compensation Commission and the consistent pronouncement of the Supreme Court in a long line of cases that substantial evidence, and nothing more, is required to support a claim for workmen's compensation. Such violation is even more regrettable where preponderant evidence was adduced showing that deceased employee and petitioner have deported themselves as husband and wife — thereby giving rise to the presumption of a lawful marriage — and where no other person claimed to be the wife of the deceased employee.

3. **ID.; WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION COMMISSION; NATURE AND SCOPE OF POWER.** — The Commission as a quasi-judicial body is invested with broad powers to hear and decide claims for compensation under the Workmen's Compensation Act. Under the rules, the hearing, investigation and determination of any question or controversy in workmen's compensation cases shall be without regard to technicalities, legal forms and technical rules on evidence. Substantial evidence, whenever necessary, shall be sufficient to support a decision, order or award.

4. **ID.; WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION ACT; RATIONALE.** — The Workmen's Compensation Act is a social legislation intended to give relief to the workman and/or his dependents in the event that the former should die or sustain an injury or sickness in the pursuit of his employment should be liberally construed to attain its laudable objectives.

APPEARANCES OF COUNSEL

Felix D. Bacabac for petitioner.
Ramon S. Villa for private respondent.
Artemio C. Facundo for respondent WCC.

D E C I S I O N

SANTOS, *J.*:

This is a petition for review filed January 12, 1976 of the decision of the Workmen's Compensation Commission in WCU

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Case No. 13763 dated December 5, 1975 disallowing the claim of petitioner for death benefits and reimbursement of medical expenses on the ground that petitioner failed to submit sufficient proof that she is the widow of the deceased, Ireneo Suarnaba, an employee of private respondent, Clavecilla Radio System.

On March 3, 1976, this Court resolved *inter alia* — in order to expedite the resolution of this case in view of its nature — to treat the petition for review as a special civil action and to require both parties to submit simultaneous memoranda,[1] On March 18, 1976, respondent Workmen's Compensation Commission, after leave secured, filed its comment.[2] Petitioner through counsel filed her memorandum on April 30, 1976.[3] On June 23, 1976, respondent Commission manifested that it adopts as its memorandum its comment on the petition for review.[4] On July 26, 1976, the respondent, Workmen's Compensation Commission, was required pursuant to Rule 43, Section 8, New Rules of Court to elevate to this Court the whole records of WCU Case No. 13763 "*Rosita S. Suarnaba vs. Workmen's Compensation Commission, et al.*"[5] And on August 6, 1976, the Court resolved to consider this case submitted for decision.[6]

It appears that petitioner Rosita Suganob Suarnaba, who filed her claim as widow of the deceased Ireneo Suarnaba, employee of private respondent, Clavecilla Radio System, was awarded by the Regional Office No. 6 of the Department of Labor in Iloilo City per Acting Referee-Ricardo Jeruta, Jr. the sum of ₱4,986.01 representing death benefits and reimbursement of medical expenses. Upon review, the Commission sustained the compensability of the claim but found the evidence submitted by the petitioner to prove that she was the widow of Ireneo

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[1] *Rollo*, p. 18.

[2] *Id.*, p. 27.

[3] *Id.*, p. 46.

[4] *Id.*, p. 56.

[5] *Id.*, p.60.

[6] *Id.*, p. 61.

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Suarnaba as insufficient and barred her from recovering any benefits. The Commission held thus —

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We sustained the referee below in holding the compensability of the instant claim. However, let us have a close look at the qualification of the herein claimant as a dependent. A perusal of the records of this case show that claimant Rosita S. Suarnaba *has not fully satisfied the requirement of the Act as to qualify her as a legal dependent of the deceased Ireneo Suarnaba. The records is bereft of such evidence to sustain the findings that she is the legal wife of the decedent.* The certification issued by the Assistant Parish Priest of the Parish of Sta. Barbara, Iloilo City attesting to the fact that they were married *cannot be considered authentic document to prove filiation between the deceased and the herein claimant but only a proof of the solemnization of their marriage sacrament.* Much to our desire to help the herein claimant, yet we cannot allow compensation benefits in this instant claim. (Italics supplied.)

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The Commission instead sentenced private respondent, Clavecilla Radio System, to pay the sum of ₱1,000.00 to the Workmen's Compensation Commission Fund in accordance with Section 8 (b) of the Workmen's Compensation Act.

Petitioner's counsel, in his spirited and well-considered arguments in support of this petition to set aside the foregoing findings and conclusions of the Commission, argues — that marriage maybe proved by parol evidence; that respondent Clavecilla Radio System did not submit any affidavit or any evidence pursuant to the order of the Hearing Officer on September 13, 1974; that petitioner submitted her affidavit to the effect that she and the late Ireneo Suarnaba were married in the Catholic Church of Sta. Barbara, Iloilo City on May 19, 1931 as shown by the Marriage Registry of Sta. Barbara Parish, attested by Fr. Samandra per Certificate of Marriage[7] dated

[7] The parish certification reads as follows —

This is to certify that in the Marriage Registry of this parish for marriages performed during the years 1927 to 1931, the following entry may be found:

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May 24, 1974 which was made an integral part of her affidavit because she lost her Marriage Contract during the Japanese Occupation and can no longer retrieve the same; that petitioner presented Eulogio Dequito, pursuant to the order of the Hearing Referee of September 13, 1974, as her witness who executed an affidavit to the effect that he knows personally the petitioner as the wife of Ireneo Suarnaba and that petitioner has been collecting his (Ireneo's) salary during his lifetime from the office of respondent Clavecilla Radio System; that, finally, the legal presumption is that a man and woman living together as husband and wife have entered into a lawful marriage.[8]

This petition is well-taken and is invested with merit; respondent Commission's decision under review should be set aside as contrary to the evidence on record and, therefore, was issued with grave abuse of its discretion.

1. The Commission held in favor of compensability but found that ". . . the records is (sic) bereft of such evidence to sustain the findings that she is the legal wife of the deceased" employee of the private respondent, Clavecilla Radio System. But a cursory examination of the records which were elevated to this Court shows that private respondent through its General Manager, Manuel C. Padua, stated in the "*Employers Report of Accident and Sickness*" that petitioner Rosita Suarnaba is the wife and one of the dependents of the deceased Ireneo Suarnaba.[9] In view of this admission by private respondent employer of claimant's, herein petitioner's status as the legal wife of its deceased employee, the same may be considered as duly established without the need for further proof, since

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On the 18th day of May 1931, IRENEO SUARNABA, single, 19 years of age, native and resident of Santa Barbara, Iloilo, son of Nicolas Suarnaba and Consolacion Sarcon, contracted marriage with Rosita Suganob, 17 years of age, single, native and resident of Santa Barbara, Iloilo, and daughter of Suganob and Rafaelo Provido. Witnesses for the marriage ceremony were Eduardo Oranjo and Rosario Umadhay, both of Sta. Barbara, Iloilo, with Fr. Gabriel M. Reyes, parish priest, as officiating minister.

[8] *Rollo*. pp. 3-4; Record. p. 41.

[9] R03-WC Form No. 3 (February 1957) Item No. 40; Record p. 251.

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the Employer's Report serves as Answer.[10] But apart from this admission, it appears that petitioner filed a *Notice and Claim for Compensation and Death Benefits* on June 14, 1969, as the wife of the deceased employee,[11] and that the *Certificate of Death* mentions petitioner Rosita Suganob as the surviving spouse of Ireneo Suarnaba.[12] Additionally, the records of the proceedings before the hearing officer show that during the hearing of the case, the affidavit of Eulogio Dequito was submitted to the effect that petitioner was living with the deceased employee and that she used to collect his salary from private respondent.[13] Finally, the Parish Certificate, as respondent Commission itself held, was " . . . a proof of the solemnization of their marriage sacrament". All the foregoing, along with the presumption that "a man and a woman deporting themselves as husband and wife have entered into a lawful contract of marriage"[14] clearly show that the petitioner is the legal wife of the deceased employee and, therefore, her claim to compensation benefits as legal wife and dependent of Ireneo Suarnaba should have been approved.

2. Prescinding from the foregoing, it thus appears that respondent Commission with a little exercise of common sense and circumspection should have realized that petitioner, who filed the claim for benefits as a result of the death of Ireneo Suarnaba, was his legal wife and dependent. The Commission as a quasi-judicial body is invested with broad powers to hear and decide claims for compensation under the Workmen's Compensation Act.[15] Under its Rules — "The hearing, investigation and determination of any question or controversy in workmen's compensation cases shall be without regard to

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[10] Rule 7, Sec. 1, Rules of the WCC, 1969 Revision.

[11] BWC Form No. 2; WCC Case No. 13763; Record p. 259.

[12] Record p. 255.

[13] *Rollo*, p. 3, Annexes "B" and "E"; Record p. 41.

[14] Sec. 5 (bb), Rule 131, Revised Rules of Court of the Philippines.

[15] Sec. 7-A, Workmen's Compensation Act.

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technicalities, legal forms and technical rules on evidence. Substantial evidence, whenever necessary, shall be sufficient to support a decision, order or award."[16] Respondent Commission disregarded this rule by negligently failing to consider the several pieces of evidence extant in the record of this case which clearly establish the marital status of petitioner and the deceased employee. Instead, it chose to enmesh itself in a web of technicality over a single piece of evidence, the Parish Certificate of Marriage. For while it conceded that said certificate is a "proof of the solemnization of the sacrament of marriage," it nevertheless, considered the same as insufficient to prove that petitioner is the legal wife of the deceased employee and insisted that the proof required is the "*original of the marriage contract or the marriage certificate duly issued by the Local Civil Registrar of the place where the marriage was solemnized*," and in the absence thereof, "*an affidavit of the claimant and at least three witnesses to the marriage and cohabitation.*"[17] Respondent Commission was, in effect, insisting that the legal relationship between petitioner and the deceased employee should be established by a *conclusive evidence of marriage*. It was thus bent on denying any claim for compensation filed by a widow who, through no fault of her own, cannot produce the primary evidence of marriage or secure three witnesses to the marriage. This is clearly violative of the fundamental precept enshrined in the aforequoted rule of the Workmen's Compensation Commission and Our consistent pronouncement in a long line of cases[18] that substantial evidence, and nothing

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[16] Rules, WCC, Rule 10, Sec. 1.

[17] Comment, p. 4, *Rollo*, p. 30.

[18] *Iloilo Chinese Commercial School v. Fabrigas*, L-16600, December 27, 1961, 3 SCRA 713; *Plywood Industries, Inc. v. WCC*, L-18165; May 30, 1962, 5 SCRA 276; *Rebodos v. WCC*, L-18737, Nov. 29, 1962, 6 SCRA 717; *Batangas Transportation Co. v. Perez*, L-19522, Aug. 31, 1964, 11 SCRA 793; *Manila Railroad Co. v. Manalang*, L-20845, Nov. 29, 1965, 15 SCRA 409; *Rio y Compañia v. WCC*, L-21467, Aug. 30, 1967, 20 SCRA 1196; *Victorias Milling Co., Inc. v. WCC*, L-25640, March 21, 1968, 22 SCRA 1215; *Manila Railroad Co. v. Rivera*, L-23021, May 29, 1968, 23 SCRA 922; *Seven-Up Bottling Co. of the Phil. v. Rimerata*, L-24349, Dec.

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more, is required to support a claim for workmen's compensation. Such violation is even more regrettable when viewed against the factual backdrop of the instant case where, as heretofore stated, preponderant evidence was adduced showing that the deceased employee and the petitioner have deported themselves as husband and wife — thereby giving rise to the presumption of a lawful marriage, and where, as in this case, no other person claimed to be the wife of the deceased employee.

3. Finally, to sustain respondent Commission's stand is to lose sight of the fact that the Workmen's Compensation Act — as a social legislation intended to give relief to the workman and/or his dependents in the event that the former should die or sustain an injury or sickness in the pursuit of his employment — should be liberally construed to attain its laudable objectives.

IN VIEW OF ALL THE FOREGOING, this petition is GRANTED. The decision of the Workmen's Compensation Commission is hereby SET ASIDE. The decision of the acting referee is hereby REINSTATED with the modification that the attorney's fees awarded is increased to FOUR HUNDRED NINETY EIGHT PESOS AND SIXTY CENTAVOS (₱498.60).

SO ORDERED.

Barredo (Actg. Chairman), Antonio, Aquino, and *Concepcion Jr., JJ.,* concur.

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24. 1968. 26 SCRA 449: *Victorias Milling Co., Inc. v. WCC,* L-25665. May 22. 1969. 28 SCRA 285: *Northwest Orient Airlines, Inc. v. Mateu,* L-25274. July 29. 1969. 28 SCRA 877: *Operators Inc. v. Cacatian,* L-26173. Oct. 31. 1969. 30 SCRA 218: *Falcon v. Mathay Sr.,* L-30303. Aug.. 31. 1970. 34 SCRA 765: *Jordan v. J. De Dios Enterprises, Inc.,* L-28895. Sept. 30. 1970. 35 SCRA 165: *Pangasinan Trans. Co., Inc. v. WCC.* 63 SCRA 349: *Bacatan v. WCC,* 67 SCRA 410: *Vda. de Olib v. City of Manila,* 68 SCRA 380.