



IS RAISING A FAMILY MISSION IMPOSSIBLE FOR WOMEN IN UNIFORM? **A CASE OF WOMEN IN THE UGANDA POLICE FORCE**

Arise Reporter

“As female police officers, we try as much as possible to make family life a priority. For starters, our earnings have to contribute to the family’s overall happiness and wellbeing. There, your efforts get to be appreciated,” says Anita. “And when it comes to finding balance, there will be sacrifices you have to make in your career for your family. However, it doesn’t mean you have to give up what you love. The most important thing is to find a satisfying career that allows you to be happy in all aspects of your life — especially at home with your family,” she adds.

Recently, Anita Nakanwagi, a wife, mother and a police officer attached to Nakifuma Police Station, took her seven-year-old twin daughters for an outing together with her husband to a popular local hangout. They had been there for only a few minutes when Nakanwagi’s phone rang. It was her boss calling her for an impromptu assignment. “It’s part of the job,” she said. Neither her children nor her husband were impressed, however.

This is one example, among many, of the challenges that women in uniform face regarding work and family life. It is an illustration of the reality women in uniform have to ponder when starting a family.

ASSP Maureen Atuhairwe - Member Head of Child and Family Department - Uganda Police Force (UPF) says that the situation has greatly improved, that it used to be much tougher. “Under the Police Standing Orders – which we no longer follow – an officer had to seek permission from the Inspector General of Police to get married,” she says. One also had to first serve for at least five years before considering getting married, and their spouses had to be investigated first before the officer

was allowed to get married to him/her. “The reasoning was that this person is going to be with you and may have access to vital information about the police and the state so they had to ensure he is a right fit.”

The UDPF Act

Such rules are no longer followed to the letter, but there are still rules and regulations that literally spell out the dos and don’ts for the officers in uniform. For example, the Uganda People’s Defence Forces Act states: “Every member of a regular force shall be on continuing full-time military service and shall at all times be liable to be employed on active service.”

Serving officers are also barred from sharing information about operations with their spouses. The UDPF Act further states: “A person subject to military law who breaches concealment in operation... breach of concealment in operation means, among others... unauthorised release of information.”

In the era of social media and terrorism, officers may want to avoid unwarranted posts about themselves and/or family members.

Showing affection in public not allowed

In the military, personnel are not allowed to hold hands with their spouses while in uniform. Talk about romance! Males may escort women or help the elderly, but affectionate hand-holding is a no-go area. The reasoning is that your spouse is required to keep his or her right hand empty in order to salute at any time. Officers are also not allowed to share uniforms with their spouses.

Atuhairwe says women in uniform undergo premarital counselling where several issues are discussed, including what is ordinarily done for civilians. These include HIV/AIDS testing. “Our officers are urged to be trustworthy in their marriages and discuss parenting with their spouses before marriage.”

According to Sarah Chesang, a police officer attached to Mukono Police Station, transparency is extremely important in navigating a marriage for the women in uniform. “I am very open to my spouse and I tell him all my day’s schedule. This



builds trust as he is aware of all my whereabouts,” Chesang says.

“I also make sure that I am in constant touch with my family by regularly calling the maid to know how the children are faring,” she adds.

Institutional policies

While institutions such as the Uganda Police and Prisons Service may have policies that support marriage and family relations for women in uniform, the same cannot be said of private security firms.

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While security guards do not lose their jobs upon getting pregnant, the condition does not seem to support motherhood. “You are not paid for the period spent away from work,” Apio says. The implication of this is that women are indirectly forced to breastfeed for a very short period so that they can start being paid again.

While in every institution there are always the dos and don’ts, Apio’s and Nakanwagi’s real-life experiences and, indeed, many more personal experiences of women in uniform prompts the debate as to whether or not raising a family is mission impossible for women in uniform.