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## How the Science of Pair Bonding is Helping End Female Genital Mutilation in Uganda

Rev. Patti Ricotta



I am Rev. Patti Ricotta and I run a small Christian NGO (non-profit), called Life Together International (LTI). We are based in Massachusetts, but I've been working mostly in East Africa over the course of the last 17 years.

During the most recent 9 years, we've had a special focus on the Sabiny people of Eastern Uganda. The Sabiny are a large tribe of about 230,000 people. The tribe is about 85% Christian and yet, they have practiced Female Genital Mutilation throughout the entire history of their tribe, some say over 2,000 years.

I was given an invitation to teach the Sabiny in 2011, after a priest from a neighboring tribe heard me teaching that the Bible says *both* men and women to be made in the image of God, and therefore women and men are equals. This priest wondered if that meant God might disapprove of the Sabiny removing a part of a woman's body God himself created.

I have been using Dr. Larry Young's research on the "Bonding Hormone," oxytocin for over a decade, just to teach about equality between the sexes. So, when I was invited to teach the Sabiny clergy, I knew exactly what they needed to understand—the science of pair bonding!

Dr. Young's 2004 pair bonding article has an amazing phrase: "...plasma oxytocin levels are elevated at the time of orgasm in women." But Sabiny women can't have orgasms, because they have been brutally mutilated.

The Sabiny—and most people groups who practice FGM—believe that preventing a woman from enjoying sexual pleasure will force her to be faithful to her husband. They reason that since sex will not be pleasurable and will be painful, a wife won't be interested in sex, except with the man who requires it of her, her husband. Instead, what we have been helping them understand is that FGM causes so much pain and anxiety, she doesn't want sex *at all*.

Instead of pleasurable sex releasing a massive dose of the bonding hormone oxytocin, painful sex releases "fight or flight" stress hormones, like cortisol and adrenaline. Not only does a mutilated wife not receive the benefit of bonding to her husband the way God intended, her brain chemicals tell her she must flee or fight to get away from the stressful and dangerous person causing her pain. This message has a profound effect on the men who hear it. Most Sabiny men end up old and alone because one the cut wife has as many children as she must (usually 6), she stands up for herself and refuses to continue having painful sex. Many move out to live with older children to get away from abusive demanding husbands.

FGM does the very opposite of what its devotees desire. And when the Sabiny learn that, they are ready to abandon the practice—immediately! I have had men poignantly ask, "Now Reverend, can we put these things back in?"

Using a 3 pronged approach that had never been used before—the Bible, the science of pair bonding, and the medical dangers of FGM—every Sabiny man, woman and youth we have reached has been ready and happy to give up the practice.

We've covered as much of the 1,200 square mile region as can be reached by the rugged mountain roads, and every person has understood that FGM cuts out the very part of a woman's body that most helps her bond in faithfulness to her husband. 2016 became the first year in the history of the tribe that not a single girl was reported to have been cut.

Unfortunately, in January of 2019, some 40 men forced their wives to be cut. These men live in areas not reachable, except by motorcycle or bicycle. They had never been to our conferences in previous years and so did not understand the science of pair bonding we had been teaching.

But just last week, (January 29-31) our team on the ground in Uganda held a men's conference with 270 men, most of whom were from the areas where the cutting took place. Life Together International raised funds to facilitate these men to come to us.

I am enormously grateful to Dr. Larry Young *not only for his* powerful and important work on the science of pair bonding, but because he was kind enough to allow me to video interview him before the conference. I knew these Sabinian men needed to learn what the other Sabinian men and women had learned. I wanted them to hear and see it from an expert and from another man.

My team in Uganda were able to open the file that contained 6 short clips that generated powerful illumination and stirred vulnerable discussions among the men who were there. Our team told me story after story of men vowing to never cut their daughters, to love and show tenderness to their wives. Many men confessed that they had not understood these things and believed it was only manly to be harsh with their wives and children.

We reached out to the Muslim community and their leader Kadhi Sabila came with dozens of his Muslim leaders. Our Director of Operations sent me this message:

"The Kadhi took the day by challenging his fellow Muslims in their relationships with wives, and the traditionalists as well. The men are excited here they want us in their villages and homes. Tell Dr. Larry, you conquered their hearts. These videos hit the nail on the head. The participants did not want to leave. They kept coming to us. This time they really got touched. Men promised to go and hold conferences in their communities."

The knowledge of pair bonding has never been more significant and life-changing than it is now—in real time, with real people. Through this science, the Sabinian people of Eastern Uganda are learning that there are very good reasons—for both women *and* men—to abandon the practice of Female Genital Mutilation. Coupled with a biblical understanding that God created man and woman to be equal, this science is helping more and more Sabinian men and women make the decision to *gladly* abandon FGM.

Our hope is that next year in January, we can answer the call of these men. They want their fellow Sabinian men to learn what Dr. Young can teach. They want their sons and daughters to learn, and they want their wives to understand the truth and forgive them for not having known how much they have suffered from being cut.

In other words, we are planning to hold a conference with up to 1,000 participants in January of 2021. We are experiencing *THE* message that has the potential to bring an end to Female Genital Mutilation, not just among the Sabinian, but among all its adherents, and in our lifetime. Will you help us do it!

With gratefulness and hope,

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