THE
BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS

NO. 124: AUGUST 31, 2016

LIZ MACH is a Maryknoll Catholic lay missioner who has spent the last 40 years of her life in Tanzania, where she works in maternal and child health care and advocates for the rights of women and girls in eastern Africa. She spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** before her presentation on female genital mutilation and child marriage in Tanzania.

HEVELONE: How did you come to be a nurse and Maryknoll Lay Missioner? Also, can you explain what a Maryknoll Lay Missioner is?

MACH: I'm a Maryknoll Lay Missioner, as you've said. About 40 years ago, I graduated with a degree in nursing from the College of Saint Catherine out in Minnesota and thought that I was probably going into the military. It was the end of the Vietnam War, so I thought that I'd do something like that. I found out I got airsick, so that wasn't going to work. I'd be the patient instead of the nurse.

I went home and was kind of searching, and a Maryknoll priest came and spoke at these church appeals. He said, "I need nurses in Africa." And I thought, "I can do that." I've always wanted to go to Africa. I like National Geographic—the romance of it. I said, "Let me try."

I went to talk to my priest, who knew the Maryknoll priest really well, and he said, "Yes, go with Maryknoll." At that point, it was a program under the Maryknoll fathers and brothers, and the sisters were a small part of it. Since then, we've gone independent. Within three months, I ended up leaving for Africa, arriving, and seeing the dust—it was the height of the dry season. I'm thinking, "Oh my God, what have I done?"

HEVELONE: This was Tanzania you went to initially?

MACH: Tanzania. I went in, and the first three and a half years were spent really learning—I was delivering babies and running maternal and child health clinics. I absolutely loved it. But I just kept re-upping every three years, since we sign a three-year contract. Since 1994,

Maryknoll Lay Missioners have been an independent part of the Maryknoll family. We raise all of our own funds. We do all our training, recruiting, and send out people. It was a big leap forward. Though we're independent as laypeople, we are able to use the Maryknoll name, which many people associate with the mission all these years.

HEVELONE: Today you're going to talk about some gender-based violence against women: in particular, female genital mutilation and child marriages. Can you tell me how you became interested in these particular topics? Was that a result of your work in Africa or was that prior to your work in Africa?

MACH: Actually it began when I first went out 40 years ago. I began to do labor and delivery. When I did my first deliveries, I really had seen one baby born in the United States, so I had to be trained in how to do labor and delivery. My father, who was a general practitioner—he's passed on now—wrote me a letter and said, "Elizabeth, do you have malpractice insurance?" Because he was a little concerned. I was too frightened to be concerned. I really didn't know. I was just kind of out there, and there weren't a whole lot of people lined up behind me to do the work.

But I became involved with the women, involved with maternal issues—maternal mortality, maternal morbidity. That was the beginning of unfolding the onion for me. One of the women that I did a delivery on at 2:00 AM one morning was a Somali woman that had received total circumcision and mutilation. I had no idea what I was looking at, and I had to have people help me understand what I was seeing. So from that experience 40 years ago, I've always maintained an interest

in maternal issues, and then through the years, I just got deeper and deeper into many issues with women.

I helped start a program on obstetric fistula, which refers to women who leak urine or stool from obstructed labor or obstructed transport. I did medical research on these women with fistula and did a lot of ethics writing on it, looking at it from the perspective of Mark's gospel. I really just wanted to understand it better for myself, but also put it in the context of being a missioner.

In that process, as we were researching this, we were getting all these young girls that were mutilated from up in the northern part of the country, and I wondered "Is there a connection here? Is there a risk factor here?" We started looking at it, and after about 11 years of that, I took off and went up into that area, not thinking I would be working with mutilation or child marriages. I went in more as a nurse consultant, because by then I had my master's in public health and was focusing on maternal/child health. So, I went in, started working in some of the clinics, and ended up at one of the clinics in an area where these acts are being done all the time. All the women that were coming to us had received the circumcision.

I was blown out of the water to be up in that area. I started working in the Diocese of Musoma in around 2008. Our new bishop came in early 2008, when he was installed. He was sitting up there one day on the altar with a Tanzanian priest and an American priest who had been working there for many years, and he turned to them just before the homily and said, "I think I'm going to just call out the elders and tell them to quit doing this practice." Both priests nearly fell off their chairs. They say now, "Oh yes, we were very supportive." But certainly there was a look of shock that somebody would initiate that without a big discussion or anything—and he did. He got up and he said, "I think this needs to end."

HEVELONE: How was that received?

MACH: The people were in shock too, but he maintained his position. So from 2008, we've been able to start really considering it. It's taken us a while to get in and do more, but we've got some major programs now going on in the diocese to end FGM (female genital mutilation).

Now, the thing is, child marriage is something that's kind of been held quiet for many years, and you don't see it. It's happening out in the villages. Those girls that are brought into these marriages are kept inside. Once we started our shelter for girls, we started seeing more and more girls coming out of those marriages—eight years old, nine years old, ten years old—and they had been in a marriage. The police had picked up the person because it's against the law, as is FGM, in the country. It's just very difficult to enforce both of them.

> **"My feeling is, after working with this for all these years, FGM is about control of women."**

HEVELONE: Can you talk a little bit more about the factors that drive FGM and child marriage? I know there are religious and social factors involved. Are those two practices related—FGM and child marriage? And then is this a problem particularly pronounced in Tanzania? Is it a problem that is more widespread?

MACH: Oh, it's definitely more widespread across that whole center-wide part of Africa. But people often want to say it's religious or it's this or that, but both Islam and Christianity do it, so it is not totally religious. In our area, it is social. To be part of that fabric of the community, you have to undergo this—a rite of passage for the girls.

My feeling is, after working with this for all these years, FGM is about control of women. The idea is that a woman cannot control her lust if she saw a man, which we know is really very different in reality. It's the other side usually. It's difficult for them to come out and say that with a man, so they're saying we've got to control the woman in this.

Girls are often a commodity. They aren't seen as equals; the girl child certainly isn't as respected as the boy child. Remember, these are really farming and pastoral herder people. They're not people that have had a lot of education. Once you start educating people, you can bring them farther along. That's what we're really trying to do with a lot of the programs in the diocese: get them to learn and understand more.

With both—when you look at child marriages and FGM—if a girl goes through the rite of passage of FGM and she's 13 years old, then she is ready for marriage. If she's ready for marriage, she's going to enter into a marriage, she's going to quit schooling, and she's going to have an early pregnancy. More young girls die between the ages of 15 and 19 all around the world from childbirth-related injuries than during childbirth. We really need to look at that; they shouldn't be impregnated and having babies that early.

If a girl is sold into marriage, which they are, and there's a dowry paid, then the family gets cows or money. The money and cows are used for the brother to buy a wife. If the girl doesn't get sold off, her brother's not going to be able to marry.

There's tremendous pressure for the girl to go into these marriages, and people don't see anything wrong with it.

HEVELONE: And they're often polygamous marriages?

MACH: Oh, yes. Many of the child marriages that we've been seeing from the girls coming in are extra wives, or the

man has maybe lost his wife and he's 55, so he marries this young girl.

HEVELONE: So FGM and child marriage are both illegal. Is polygamy illegal in Tanzania?

MACH: No, they can still do that. There are people really working to fight it, and you see less of it. I think generations ago, the grandfather might have had four wives. Maybe the father had two wives. Now this generation, there is maybe one wife. The women, if they're educated, are not putting up with it.

HEVELONE: You've talked a little bit about the physical consequences of early childbirth and fistula. Are there any other physical consequences to FGM?

MACH: Massive, yes. Most of what we've always been seeing for many years has been anecdotal—people are seeing it in a clinic or whatever. For example, I did a delivery, and it was a totally pharaonic circumcision. I didn't know what to do and how to take care of it.

In 2006, the World Health Organization did the first massive study—28,000 women in six countries—and they looked at all the different forms of circumcision or mutilation as compared with women who had not gone through FGM. Any woman that has gone through any form, and the more severe it gets, the more severe her reaction is to it.

Any circumcised or mutilated woman will be more likely to have reproductive health problems throughout their continuous life. It's going to be painful sex. We hear that over and over again as we're doing seminars—people saying, "Oh, really, is that why my wife cries every night when I have sex with her?" Yes.

This is the reality of it. Women are going to have problems with pregnancies. They're going to have problems during the delivery. Their deliveries take longer. There's extended labor. There are many missed opportunities for a medical person to step in and do something earlier.

Since we don't have good medical care, women die or have all the other complications, like fistula. It's very serious.

HEVELONE: It's sobering, isn't it? Tell me about particular resources from within Catholicism to address these issues.

MACH: First of all, the bishop when he stands up and says no to FGM. Bishop Michael Msonganzila actually went to Rome in 2009 for the Senate on Africa and spoke from the floor about it. He is the first bishop that has ever brought it up on the floor. He's making inroads right and left. The sad part of the whole thing was that many of the women that came to him after, that complained about him doing it, were sisters from West Africa, where it's also done. They said, "This is our issue. Stay out of it. This is a woman's issue." That's the thing—in Tanzania, we don't feel it's a woman's issue. We really feel strongly that the men have to be a part of the change and the solution.

We're doing numerous things with the men. One of our priests in Tanzania is running what's called the "Tanzanian Safe Circumcision for Boys" group. We've started it at a parish level, and we'll just keep spreading it. We're looking at young men, because they have their circumcision at the same time the girls have the mutilation.

They go through as a cohort together. They are considered part of one big group, if it's all done in that year. We have rescue camps for the girls, and we've also started doing rescue camps for the boys. I think we had over 100 boys this last time—where they come in and they look at gender-based violence and what can be their reaction, how should they be responding to girls that are going through rape or prostitution or whatever? We teach them about it, and then at the end of that time, we bring in medical people and we do a safe circumcision on them, so that they aren't done poorly at the village level.

We're also doing seminars for adult men. We've started with our catechists for the diocese, which are mainly men. We're trying at all levels to get the men along the project with us. The church has to do that, and we need to be speaking out about it.

HEVELONE: That's fantastic. I'd like to hear more about the Jipe Moyo shelter. Tell me more about it, and how it got started. Who's there, and why do they come?

MACH: First of all, a person that is really fantastic is Sister Annunciata Chacha–she has a master's in social work from Daemen College in Amherst, New York. She's a Tanzanian sister, and she's our

director. She runs the whole thing. She has total heart for these girls.

I also want to mention Sister Rose. She is a young, Immaculate Heart sister. Sister Rose is the day-to-day person with them, and she's fantastic for someone that hasn't had a lot of education for working in social work. I'd love to see her get more, because she really could do it.

Jipe Moyo started as a counseling for HIV center, and people were coming in working with AIDS-related matters. Eventually they started working with street boys, and we have a little bit of a shelter—there's about 10 to 15 boys at the shelter on the compound. That's all that was there.

We built a convent, and as we were building a convent for these sisters, we had a donor come in. They just had to do the last bit of putting on some windows and doors, so it wasn't a big expense. And she said, "Sister, what's your next challenge?" Without missing a beat, she says "I want to build a girls' shelter right there."

Within a year, we had the proposal and the money back and the building up. It was unbelievable. We started taking in girls. We now need to expand it, and we want to have more girls come.

HEVELONE: How many girls are there now?

MACH: We have at least 40, and it was built for 24 or so. We took some more rooms and added beds. Everybody's in a bunk-bed, but they don't care. They're there. Having donors like that, that just kind of, boom, they're in with you right away. It's amazing.

We've expanded the shelter now to be a girls' shelter for all of these cases. We didn't know what we'd get. The first one in was a young woman that was living on the streets. Her mother was a barmaid. The mother died of HIV, she didn't know who her father was, and she was thrown out on the streets. The sisters picked her up and brought her in and said, "We've got to start a shelter now." That's kind of how we do things in Africa: "Oh, the need is there? Let's do it." You have no idea how you're going to accomplish anything, at first.

We started, and some girls running from FGM that knew they couldn't go home came to stay. They can't stay at home, because somebody in the family will take them to be cut, and they didn't have a lot of ability to say no. They started coming and the police started working with us, as well as the social services of the government. They started bringing kids, because it's really a fantastic place to bring them. They help us with some things. It's a struggle every day to feed and find clothing. But as I keep saying with Sister Chacha, "We'll get it. If it's meant to be, we'll get it."

"It's a struggle every day to feed and find clothing. But as I keep saying with Sister Chacha, "We'll get it. If it's meant to be, we'll get it."

They were in my office about a month ago, and they were saying, "Liz, we're at our end. We don't have any money for salaries." I just looked at them and somebody brought me a paper from the bishop's office. I said, "Let me look at it." There it was—the donation we needed, and I hadn't seen it yet.

HEVELONE: You call that the work of the Holy Spirit, right?

MACH: Absolutely. We trust in it. So if it's meant to be, we'll do it. The shelter welcomes all girls with anything. We have counselors there. Certainly Sister Chacha does a lot of the counseling, but we also have others doing it. We do all the medical care on those girls. If they've gone through rape, they've been traumatized, and some of them are really a mess. We try to do just a simple medical and then the real stuff that comes from the trauma.

HEVELONE: Education is a portion of it too?

MACH: We are working to get the girls into school. We've got to get them educated. But some of the girls are so old—maybe 16, 17, and they really can't go into primary school, because they're too old. We will teach them to read and write and do some work with them. We've also started a vocational school there, so they're learning how to sew and knit. We have knitting machines for sweaters. We're just trying everything we can. We'd like to get to the point where we're making some things that we could be selling that could help support the project.

We have chickens, and we're trying to work on self-sustainability. That's important. We have a massive garden, and we can tend to it year-round. And we've just put in a huge fish pond, and we're raising tilapia fish. That's my favorite part. I'd love to get a little line and hang out there.

The week before I left, we drilled for a huge borehole, so we have water now. The water will help our garden year-round, as well as all our fruit trees – we have banana, papaya, avocado, and orange. We're really working for self-sustainment.

HEVELONE: Sustainability is great. Is that where the majority of your work is done?

MACH: No, that's not my job. That's my love.

I work for the bishop. I'm in the office of planning and development. He has two arms to the diocese. There's the pastoral side and then there's the planning and development. Our office covers all of the health, social services, education, and communication for the diocese. They're all under my office. I monitor all of the grants.

Anybody that receives money for building a church, building a rectory, building a convent, a school project, or anything else has to come through me and my office. Then I make sure that we have transparency and accountability with the money and all the reports go in. That's my side job, my day job.

HEVELONE: Going back to FGM and child marriage for a moment, I'm curious to see what signs of change or progress you've seen, and you've talked about this a little bit already. Do you feel like it's similar to polygamy, where it's mainly the older generation that does it? Do you see signs of change? What remains to be done? Where would you like to see things head?

MACH: The biggest sign that we're seeing is that it's talked about. We never talked about child marriages until about two years ago. We weren't talking about sex trafficking. It's a veil that just covered everything, and nobody talked. I'm really excited we're talking about it. I've seen big steps because we are talking about it.

HEVELONE: Communication is essential.

MACH: Getting seminars going and conducting outreaches. The bishop talks about it all the time when he's out. He'll just very nicely say, you know, the end is here. We've got to quit hurting girls this way. If you have somebody at that level that's speaking, we're fine.

HEVELONE: People listen. I'm surprised. I wasn't aware it was as prevalent within the Christian community in that part of the world as the Muslim.

MACH: Christian communities do it just as much. Both religions, the Bible, and the Koran are against it. People cannot go back to that and say, "But the Koran or the Bible says this." No, forget it. There's no proof.

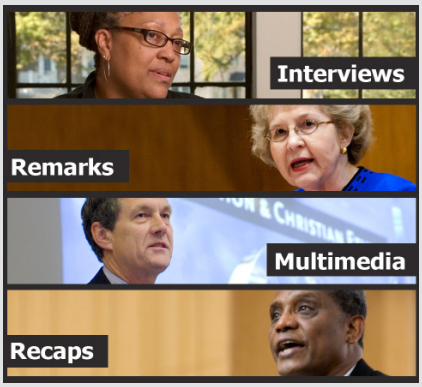
I'd like to say—some of it comes from speaking the last couple days—but I'm the lucky one. I'm here talking about it today. But this project and this diocese is all Tanzanian. It's not me—It's not Liz out doing all this. This is truly an African response. I just happen to be the one here because I came home to visit my mother. It should be a Tanzanian speaking to you—the bishop could speak as eloquently.

One of our women who runs our whole department on FGM and women and development goes to Europe all the time. She goes to Austria, Germany, and she does exactly what I'm doing. She is the face of it for us. I work with her all the time to make sure she's got all the resources she needs to do it. It's really Tanzanian. It's not Liz. Make that really clear.

HEVELONE: I will. Thanks for joining us. We appreciate it.

MACH: Thank you for hosting me. I'm glad to be here.

[END]



Visit **bc.edu/boisi-resources** for a complete set of the **Boisi Center Interviews** and audio, video, photographs, and transcripts from our events.

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life

Boston College
24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860
fax 617-552-1863
boisi.center@bc.edu

boisicenter

@boisi_center