

FOREWORD

In 1979, in line with a philosophy that a continuous increase in country specific knowledge was an indispensable part of a dynamic program of policy planning and project implementation, AID/Nouakchott asked Barbara Abeillé, a local hire researcher, to provide us with some perspective on how Mauritania's women see their lives and problems in light of the country's rapidly changing circumstances. Her report, "A Study of Female Life in Mauritania," which has been reproduced for general distribution by AID/PPC/WID and is recommended background reading to this present work, gave the mission its first real taste of the Mauritanian woman's situation.

To respond to the insights gained from Barbara Abeillé's report demanded a far more profound and technical understanding of the socio-economic circumstances women in Mauritania face and to which any development plan must adjust. To provide such an in-depth picture required an effort beyond available Mission resources. At this juncture, the Office of Women in Development, under its technical assistance project, provided the Mission with the assistance of Melinda Smale, an international economist with the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Smale's work, presented here, provides much more than was expected. It not only furnishes a vivid picture of Mauritanian women's economic and social status but it also puts them in the context of the whole society and forcefully demonstrates how disregarding the reality of women's lives not only does injury to them but to any real understanding of the society in which they live as an inseparable part.

Because women are an integral part of their society, some elemental understanding of Mauritania's social structure is a prerequisite for comprehending the context of their lives. The introduction to this study is a revision of that originally provided for Barbara Abeillé's study and is reproduced here at the request of Melinda Smale.

The Office of Women in Development, in collaboration with AID/Mauritania is pleased to present this document in the hope that the specific information will be useful to project design teams and individuals and organizations implementing projects in Mauritania and with the belief that the study can serve as a model which other Missions might consider replicating.