



United States  
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# USDA Women in Afghanistan: Renee Thakali

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**USDA agricultural expert Renee Thakali works with women in Ghazni province.**

from July 2008 through July 2009. She took leave from her position as an ecosystem restoration team leader at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie in Illinois (she has since returned) to work in Afghanistan, bringing more than 30 years of experience from the U.S. Forest Service (25 years) and the Peace Corps (8 years in Nepal).

She worked closely with Ghazni's provincial director of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock on a variety of agriculture projects, including horticulture cultivation techniques for grapes and apples, beekeeping, animal husbandry, and planting trees on degraded lands to protect watersheds. While many of these projects will have a lasting impact in Ghazni, Thakali said that she is most proud of training a few young Afghan agricultural extension workers, sharing new skills and providing access to resources. She valued establishing close, working relationships with all Afghans.

"Meeting with village leaders under a tree to discuss their needs or meeting with Afghan women who braved entry onto the military base to meet with me, was highly rewarding," she said.

Thakali is one of 12 women deployed by USDA since 2003 to help Afghanistan revitalize its agricultural sector. USDA has deployed 101 agricultural experts in all since 2003. Experts like Thakali are working with partners from the Government of Afghanistan, U.S. and coalition forces, the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and others to strengthen the capacity of the Afghan government, rebuild agricultural markets, and improve management of natural resources.

John Brewer, Administrator for USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service, which oversees the department's efforts, recognizes the work of women like Thakali as crucial to the nation's progress.

"If we really want to improve the lives of Afghan women at every level of society," said Brewer, "then the cultural realities in Afghanistan require skilled professionals like Renee Thakali to work one-on-one with

Before she arrived in Ghazni province in eastern Afghanistan, Renee Thakali considered Afghan women mysterious yet heroic figures. Under their religious coverings and living behind the mud walls of family homes, Afghan women are often shielded from foreigners like Thakali. Although she felt an immediate bond to the country's women and girls, it took some time before either approached this civilian agricultural expert from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Thakali, wearing pants and donning body armor, and the Afghan women, floating past under their ubiquitous blue burqas, seemed an uncommon match. But as Thakali increased her visibility in the villages, Afghan women began to seek her out.

"I was encouraged by the resiliency and dedication of the Afghan women I met and worked with," said Thakali. "They had gone through so many tragedies and difficulties, but were ready to forge ahead to make a better life for all Afghan women."

Thakali served as a member of U.S. civilian-military provincial reconstruction and agribusiness development teams in Ghazni



**Here, Thakali plants trees in Ghazni province. More trees in Afghanistan will help to improve soil quality and buffer vulnerable watersheds.**

women and women's groups. Experts like Renee are cultivating leadership in the public and private sectors, helping to increase access to education and health care, and generating jobs for women, especially in agriculture."

Two of Thakali's most positive memories of her time in Afghanistan are of Afghan women. The first, she said, is the time she spent working with a young Afghan woman who was the only female graduate of a local veterinary school.

"She needed hands-on clinical work and business skills before she could open her own private veterinary clinic in a remote village," said Thakali.

Thakali also recalled working with the U.S. Army to write a funding proposal to rebuild a school for girls after she met with one of the school's teachers.

"The Taliban had burned their former school, which was one room in a farm house. When I visited the village, the girls were holding classes outside in the village center, sitting knee-to-knee on woven mats. They had one small, beat up blackboard propped up on a chair. Their eyes reflected brightly their strong desire to learn."



For more information about USDA's efforts in Afghanistan, please visit [www.usda.gov/afghanistan](http://www.usda.gov/afghanistan).