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# Celebrating International Mother Language Day and Linguistic Rights in Bangladesh

By Heifer International

February 2, 2021

**Last Updated:** February 18, 2021

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A few days before one of Bangladesh's biggest public holidays Nur Islam Neha was busy building. The 12-year-old from Rajshahi district had decided to make a small clay copy of the Shaheed Minar monument in the capital of Dhaka in celebration of **International Mother Language Day** on February 21. The three-pronged structure serves as a memorial to four students killed by police on February 21, 1952 in Dhaka during protests over the then government's language policy.

"We are making this to show respect to the martyrs," says Nur.

Like so much in the region, the conflict dates back to the 1947 partition of India after which East Bengal became East Pakistan. When Pakistan made Urdu the national language for both West and East Pakistan – today's Bangladesh and a majority Bengali speaking country – protests erupted. After Bangladesh was born in 1971, the new country initiated International Mother

Language Day to draw attention to national languages and the students who were killed in the protests. UNESCO approved the initiative in 1999, and it began to be observed worldwide the following year. All this



(Left to right) Ayesha Khaton (8), Nur Islam Neha (12) and Mossamat Sharboni (10) make flags and a replica monument to celebrate International Mother Language Day in Hujuripara, Bangladesh on February 13, 2020. Photo by Russell Powell.

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wanted to snatch away our freedom of talking in this language. We snatched it back from them. That's why we feel proud."

Nur chose the location for her monument carefully, wanting the shoebox sized structure to be both visible from her home in Hujuripara village and the nearby street. She also thought the shady spot near a pond would be safe. She was wrong. While the monument itself is a relatively simple rectangular shape that takes just a few days to construct and dry, the building process has lasted far longer.

"Sometimes cows passing have broken it, several times the kids around, they have broken it. So, it has been broken and made, broken and made."

Nur's four-year-old nephew is one of the main culprits. Her friends, Mossamat Shraboni, 10, and Ayesha Khaton, 8, help with reconstruction.

"We want to make this because want to celebrate February 21," says Mossamat.

*(Story written by Katya Cengel)*

## Heifer Bangladesh Shares Song for International Mother Language Day

Last year, Heifer Bangladesh staff members put together a short video to celebrate International Mother Language Day.

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