

SAHAJ is a civil society organization based in Vadodara, Gujarat, that has spent nearly four decades advancing women's health, rights, and equity in India. Its approach is built on evidence: gathering data at the community level, turning it into advocacy, strengthening systems, and facilitating policy dialogues on the issues related to the achievements of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2017, SAHAJ became the India partner of the Equal Measures 2030, among the earliest national partners. The partnership connected SAHAJ's health-equity expertise with a global SDG framework and a data-driven advocacy methodology, enabling the organization to move beyond the health sector and take on wider gender equality issues across health, education, political participation, economic empowerment, and policy reform.

33k

views of SDG-focused
civil servant training
content

129+

Gender advocates trained
in data-driven advocacy

6

Elected Women Representatives
trained in five states

Equal Measures 2030's methodology approved for India's national gender measurement framework & SDG Gender Index integrated into policy briefs

Building accountability from the ground up

SAHAJ's founding insight is simple but radical: marginalized people are not beneficiaries; they are rights-holders. A woman who knows she is entitled to comprehensive antenatal care, not just an iron tablet and a promise, becomes a potent force for social accountability. A community that knows what it should receive, and what to do when it doesn't, is far harder to ignore.

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“Partnering with Equal Measures has strengthened our ability to ground advocacy in robust data. Through our work on gender and SDGs, we tried to elevate the lived experiences of marginalized groups, transforming their everyday challenges into actionable evidence for systemic change.”

- Nilangi Sardeshpande, Project Head, SAHAJ

This philosophy is rooted in SAHAJ's pioneering work on social accountability for maternal health. Long before the SDG era, SAHAJ was doing what Equal Measures calls data-driven advocacy: turning lived realities into evidence, and evidence into pressure for change.



"What drives and inspires us is the pursuit of the utopia that is out there on the horizon."

STORY OF RUMI BORGOHAIN,

PROGRAM LEAD, SEDO (SOCIO- ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION), DHEMAJI, ASSAM

In 2019, I got the opportunity to attend a maternal health training organised by SAHAJ. That training became the turning point of my professional journey. It inspired me to work in the field of community health, and soon after, I got the opportunity to work with SAHAJ in Dhemaji district.

From 2019 to 2026, I received many trainings from SAHAJ on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). Through these trainings, I gained valuable knowledge on male and female reproductive systems, menstruation and menstrual hygiene management, contraception, abortion, maternal health, nutrition, adolescent growth and development, and the role of VHSNCs in strengthening village health systems. These are important yet sensitive topics, and I realized that there was very little discussion and awareness about them in our villages.

I started my journey by working with community in five villages of Dakhin Dhemaji. Today, I am working across eleven villages in the Dakhin Dhemaji and Shubahi areas. This journey has helped me grow not only as a professional but also as a person. The knowledge I gained from SAHAJ supported me during my own pregnancy and post-delivery period, and now I am able to share the same knowledge with communities.

Today, SRHR has become one of my greatest strengths in my professional life.

In 2025, I was recognized as a Resource Person at the Dhemaji District Panchayat Resource Centre (DPRC), where I now contribute to capacity-building programs for women leaders.

The DPRC in-charge recognized my knowledge and entrusted me with conducting sessions on reproductive health during training programs. This recognition has given me great confidence and motivation



When SAHAJ joined Equal Measures in 2017, the hook, as Nilangi describes it, was connecting their health and gender equity expertise with global frameworks like the SDGs, with data at the center. Before the partnership, SAHAJ's work sat primarily within health-focused data and qualitative insights. The Equal Measures collaboration enabled them to expand: to look at health in relation to education, political participation, economic inclusion, and the full spectrum of gender equality issues tracked in the SDG Gender Index.

THE JOURNEY

SAHAJ's journey with Equal Measures has been one of expansion. What began as capacity building for grassroots advocates in Gujarat and Assam grew into engagement with national policymakers, universities, civil servants, and regional and global platforms.

A key early shift was the development of state-level SDG Gender Index report cards for Assam, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Punjab. Translating global data into granular, locally relevant evidence that SAHAJ could use to influence state and sub-national level policymakers. Alongside this, SAHAJ developed a grassroots SDG training manual to bring the global framework down to the community level and built DDA skills across 129 local advocates and partner organizations.

The DDA training produced measurable outcomes that outlasted the workshops. An LGBTIQ partner organization, Forum Foundation, used its training to conduct surveys during COVID-19 lockdowns about transgender people and successfully advocated with district officials to allow alternative forms of identification for accessing food ration kits. A SARTHI participant used their new data skills to identify the exclusion of Dalit and migrant adolescents from national sexual and reproductive health programmes, and successfully advocated for their inclusion.



“People are sometimes wary of numbers and mathematics, but the workshops helped participants push past this and sharpen their advocacy based on hard evidence”

- Nilangi Sardeshpande, Project Head, SAHAJ

SAHAJ also invested heavily in what Equal Measures 2030 describes as “socializing and localizing the SDGs” embedding gender equality frameworks into spaces that shape the next generation of decision-makers. An academy responsible for training and examining civil servants in India produced instructional content using SDG Gender Index to teach future bureaucrats about the SDGs and gender equality. That content has been viewed over 33,000 times. SAHAJ also co-developed an online self-paced course on SDGs and Gender Equality with the Feminist Policy Collective.

In 2023, SAHAJ authored an academic chapter, [“How Far Are We from Achieving Gender Equality within the SDGs Framework?”](#), published in Transforming Unequal Gender Relations in India and Beyond. The chapter draws directly on SDG Gender Index data, placing India’s gender equality performance within a global comparative framework. It was showcased at the Asia Pacific Population Conference and the Bodoland International Knowledge Fest in Assam in 2023.



NITI AAYOG: ADVOCACY THAT OPENS DOORS

A significant and instructive episode in SAHAJ’s journey with Equal Measures was its engagement with [NITI Aayog](#), India’s apex public policy think tank responsible for SDG tracking and implementation.

SAHAJ was recognized as a gender data expert and invited to co-advise on the development of a national Gender Index for India, contributing technical input on indicators and methodology, drawing on the Equal Measures’ SDG Gender Index. The Equal Measures methodology was approved for inclusion in India’s national monitoring framework. A significant institutional outcome. SAHAJ also contributed to Voluntary National Review processes as an active member of the Feminist Policy Collective.



THE COALITION EFFECT

Equal Measures 2030’s role has been to connect SAHAJ’s deep local expertise to a global framework and evidence base that opens doors that were previously closed. As Aarushi Khanna, Equal Measures 2030’s Asia Pacific Regional Lead, reflected: “They really own the tool. They talk about the Index in all the convening spaces they’re part of — and they go further, doing additional analysis on their own to substantiate the data-driven messages coming from the Index and provide nuance and context.”

→ **National gender measurement framework.** SAHAJ’s technical collaboration with IWWAGE and NITI Aayog resulted in Equal Measures methodology being approved for inclusion in India’s national SDG gender monitoring framework — a significant step toward institutionalizing gender data in national policy.

→ **33,000+ views of SDG civil servant training content.** Using SAHAJ resources, a major training academy for India’s would-be civil servants produced instructional content on the SDGs and gender equality. That content reached over 33,000 views — embedding gender equality principles in the next generation of India’s policy administrators.

→ **Online course on gender and SDGs.** SAHAJ co-developed a credit course on SDGs and Gender Equality with the Feminist Policy Collective, with the Index as a core tool. The SDG framework is now embedded in academic curricula reaching future researchers, policymakers, and advocates.

→ **Grassroots advocacy wins from DDA training.** 129+ advocates trained in data-driven advocacy have used their skills to secure concrete outcomes: transgender community members gained access to food rations during lockdown; Dalit and migrant adolescents secured inclusion in the national health programme; village-level health monitoring was strengthened using SDG-informed indicators.

→ **Elected Women Representatives trained in one state.** SAHAJ is currently training Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) — women who hold reserved governance seats at village level but have historically been sidelined by male relatives — in SDG frameworks and gender equality data. The goal is to build their agency to make real decisions on budgets, services, and community priorities.

→ **Pre-budget consultations influencing Union Budget advocacy.** SAHAJ contributed data on contraceptive program gaps to the Feminist Policy Collective's advocacy on the 2021–22 Union Budget for India, generating follow-up engagement from the Ministry of Women and Child Development on gender-responsive financing.

→ **Global Advocacy and Visibility.** Equal Measures 2030's regional platform connected SAHAJ to Asia-Pacific processes including ICPD30, the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, and C20/G20 engagements, amplifying India's lessons within wider feminist coalitions. Ongoing WHO dialogue: SAHAJ has been engaged in a sustained series of conversations with the WHO Director-General on the relationship between civil society, gender data, and health policymaking.

→ **Flexible funding.** Equal Measures' subgrants provided sustained resourcing for SAHAJ's advocacy work, including through the severe disruptions of COVID-19 and FCRA licensing constraints.

→ **SAHAJ's representative, Dr. Nilangi Sardeshpande serves on Equal Measures 2030's Steering Group** contributing to coalition governance and co-shaping the shared DDA curriculum and community of practice.

Adapting when traditional advocacy becomes impossible

SAHAJ adapted its advocacy approaches by deepening community-rooted organizing, strengthening evidence generation, and expanding the use of data-driven advocacy. Working through academia and institutions, embedding gender equality and SDG frameworks into university curricula, entry-level bureaucrat training, and civil servant education. The logic is long-term: shape the thinking of decision-makers before they take up positions of power.

During COVID-19, SAHAJ mobilized USD 23,000 for emergency relief, distributed over 1,000 food kits to vulnerable households — including LGBTQI members — and provided 500+ sanitation kits to frontline community workers. The organization's grassroots presence and close partnerships with community networks made this possible when government systems struggled to reach the most marginalized.



LOOKING AHEAD

SAHAJ's work is increasingly focused on what Equal Measures refers to as “sub-national granularity” bringing the SDG Gender Index down from the national level to states, districts, and communities where governance decisions are made. Their work with Elected Women Representatives is the clearest expression of this: it aims to close the gap between women who formally hold power and women who can use it.

SAHAJ is also expanding its qualitative work on women in India's informal and unorganized sector producing the kinds of contextualized narratives that complement Index data and make the numbers speak. Read Equal Measures 2030's blog on gender equality and the G20, co-authored by SAHAJ: [How can the G20 agenda help advance progress on gender equality?](#)

In a political environment where feminist advocacy faces sustained pressure, SAHAJ's model, embedding gender data into institutions, building grassroots accountability, and patiently cultivating spaces for change, is a demonstration of what it means to do this work for the long term.

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“We need to lean in, to go deeper and to nurture a creative young generation that will, finally, sweep these barriers away” — Nilangi Sardeshpande, Project Head, SAHAJ

Learn more about SAHAJ's work:



sahaj.org.in/



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