Engaging with Businesses on ending Child Marriages by creating Businesses Respecting Child Rights (BRCR) Villages: Best Practices, Gaps and Strategies for scaling up

Introduction:

Sanarpatti Block Level Federation (SBLF), since July 2022, intending to prevent Child Marriage, has been strategically gaining commitment from business owners and religious leaders providing services to marriage ceremonies. The pilot phase implemented in 12 panchayats in Sanarpatti Block, Dindigul between July 2022 and January 2023. The pilot phase has covered 70 villages in 12 Panchayats of Sanarpatti Taluk in the Dindigul district, which has the 2nd largest reported incidents of child/early marriage in Tamil Nadu. About 14 Panchayat leaders and 90 business owners (and religious leaders) have signed the agreement thus far. The vendors are encouraged todisplay the signed agreement at their business premises.

The pilot phase included awareness discussions with Gram Sabha members, vendors, adolescent girls/boys, community organisations and school management committees. Besides, door to door sticker campaign supporting the prevention of Child Marriage was organised during the project period.

This document reviews the best practices & gaps in the concept and implementation process and suggests way-forward strategies for scaling up.

1.1. The Strategy and Relevance

Since 2019, PiC has been implementing diverse projects in Dindigul District. PiC has garnered active involvement of the businesses, vendors and communities at various stages of project management, including data collection, needs assessment, strategy development, program planning and implementation. This approach of developing projects in consultationwith the community has far-reaching results, as priority needs are identified and responded to on time.

The participatory evolution of strategies, approaches and processes is one of the main strengths of the BRCR project. This enables ownership and commitment, especially from the community organisations that are involved in the process since its inception. At this stage, this translates to identifying gaps as the project progresses and rectifying the same on the go. Long and open discussions with various stakeholders are conducted regularly, laying the foundations for system-level changes. A process-oriented approach to mitigate the complex issues causing child/early and forced marriage has greater potential to result in sustainable outcomes and impact.

During one of the Natural Leaders Group meetings, we had discussed strategies to prevent the child/early marriage that was becoming rampant in our region. The steep increase during and after the pandemic was alarming. It was becoming increasingly difficult to rely solely on 1098 - because the people were targeting the socially conscious volunteers who might have passed on the information and showed aggressive reaction.

The collective suggestion was to put pressure on the businesses that cater to marriages - the marriage hall owners, tent rentals, photographers, beauticians, religious leaders, and caterers. That's how the concept of creating Business Respecting Child Rights (BRCR) villages was born.

- Subrahmaniyan, Volunteer (and Primary School Teacher, Velampatti)

As per the project team and volunteers, the **rationale** behind the project is:

1. **The lack of knowledge about the PCMA act,** especially the clause that explicitly states that anyone involved or party to child/early and forced marriage is punishable.
2. **The harsh, at times life-threatening, community reaction to those who alert/inform 1098**: Though everyone is aware of 1098, its services and its strict adherence to confidentiality, many socially conscious members of the society have become increasingly hesitant to alert/inform 1098, fearing the reaction from the community. They are often threatened and scared of social ostracism.
3. **The management overload of 1098**: Despite the rapid responses by 1098, often there is a delay, as the information reaches only at the last minute. With increased incidents of child/early marriages, the state structure is insufficient to stop the marriage or enforce punishment.
4. **The continuing community resistance** to stop the practice of child/early marriage, stating economic/livelihood, tradition/custom and [girl child] protection concerns.

The BRCR project is conceived based on the assumption that if enough businesses are aware of laws as well as punishments associated with violating Child Rights, then they would exercise pressure on the families/communities to stop child/early and forced marriages.

When we asked the Anganwadi workers why they wouldn't report child/early marriage, they informed us that they had been beaten and threatened several times for alerting 1098 earlier. They are afraid of social ostracization.

- Murugeshwari, Facilitator, SBLF

The strategy is to encourage all businesses, enterprises, companies and employers to commit to child rights by prominently displaying their commitment through a sticker or poster outside their premises. These stickers would be self-signed by the stakeholder stating that "we do not cater to weddings which involve child marriage" or "we do not sell addictive substances, especially to children".

In a village, where all businesses and enterprises have explicitly stated or made such commitments, and the same is stated in the Gram Sabha and approved; such villages would be termed as BRCR villages.

[Ref: BRCR Concept Note]

The Process and Initial responses from the field

Initially, the businesses were approached directly. Later on, the Panchayat leaders were contacted first to discuss the problems and laws related to child marriages. After their commitment to work towards a child marriage-free village, the issue was then discussed during the Gram Sabha meetings. Usually, there would be a few rounds of deliberations and heated arguments, but in the majority of cases, a resolution will be passed by the village leaders. The Panchayat president then signs a letter urging all businesses to refuse services promoting child/early marriage and respect Child Rights.

> **This approach of involving the Panchayat and Gram Sabha has more potential, as through the deliberations, many parents and other influencers could become aware of the laws safeguarding Child Rights and the need to enforce the same. The public commitment is expected to add more pressure on the village leaders to actively intervene during future violations.**

However, a few businesses belonging to the opposite political party or faction, though agreeing to the commitment, refused to display the agreement, if it carried the President's signature. Also, getting the commitment of a few Panchayat leaders was challenging and a few blatantly rejected stating their commitment to support the wishes of the voters. A few were unreachable as well. In one instant, the village president who also owns a marriage hall expressed his open support for child/early marriage quoting social customs.

It is here that the strategy to approach businesses directly yields the desired outcome. The openness and flexibility to develop and revise context-specific implementation methodology improve overall programme effectiveness.

The probability of success of the project depends on gaining commitment from all the businesses in the region. That is 100% commitment from 100% of businesses in the region. To achieve this, SBLF has been listing all the businesses in the target area and approaching them. So far, almost 90 % of the businesses that have been reached out to by the team have expressed their commitment to support the cause. This is a promising ratio, and many times, multiple efforts and several rounds of discussions have been held to receive their acceptance.

However, as of now, structures aren't in place to monitor their adherence to the laws. There is a risk of businesses signing the agreement, yet succumbing to pressures from the community.

Similarly, there is always a risk of non-compliant businesses supporting child/early and forced marriage denied services by the businesses respecting child rights.

Relevance and effectiveness

Previous studies suggest that the 'law enforcement' strategy, 'if and when implemented in combination with other strategies such as empowerment and economical support could prevent child marriages'. It is especially promising in this context because a majority of the vendors also belong to the same villages and if convinced, they have the potential to become powerful negotiators for social change. On the contrary, as members of the community, they too can be forced by conformists.

However, it is to be noted that, during the pilot phase, the priority focus has been to create BRCR villages and other activities including awareness creation primarily served as strategies to achieve the enforcement of laws by businesses and religious leaders.

The main temple poojaris are expected to maintain a registry with Aadhar details while officiating a marriage. But, when the poojaris ask for aadhar card proof, the families perform the marriage at smaller shrines, without the presence of the poojari. People are always on the lookout to find loopholes, rather than attempting to change their behavior

- Chandradevi, Facilitator, SBLF.

…if a service provider refuses to support a child/early and forced marriage, the party is expected to approach other businesses in the same locality. And, in a majority of the cases, fearing legal action, the marriage party would attempt to bring forward the date and complete the process as quickly as possible. There is also a possibility of marriages being held outside the formal structures or shifting the marriage to an altogether different location.

Since January, two families have tried booking my hall for early marriage. I refused both.

One was an arranged marriage, and the very next day, fearing legal involvement, they were married off in a hurry. The second was a case of love-elopement, and because the girl had already spent a few days with the boy, there was no other choice, but to marry her off

- Rangarajan, Owner of Ranha Marriage Hall, Sanarpatti

There is a lack of monitoring/feedback structure that would quickly spread the news of potential child marriage to the concerned legal bodies. This poses a huge threat to the overall purpose of the project. During the pilot phase, the businesses haven't been informed of what to do in case someone approached for services to conduct child/early and forced marriage. They have committed to refuse services, and in all probability, they might. However, there is no clarity as to the next action steps. It is assumed that they would call 1098, or the SBLF Facilitator, whose contactnumbers are available with all the businesses who have signed theagreement.

So, there are no data as to the number of marriages averted/delayed in the last 6 months. One of the vendors reported that two of the clients he had refused had gone ahead and completed the marriage in a rush. Based on previous experiences, this sort of backlash is considered a potential outcome in projects that predominantly employ the strategy of law enforcement. A 2015 study by Nirantar Trust clarifies that earlier interventions involving marriage service providers, religious leaders and police have less than desirable results, even negative ones:

….the number of marriages prevented or intervened in becomes the measure of success for such organisations. However, they may cause more harm than good to the families and individuals they hope to help. Within close-knit rural communities, a police intervention or raid at a wedding is a matter of stigma and shame. Such interventions can have deep emotional trauma on the families, as well as injure their social reputation and standing. Even though it is tempting to think that such a punishment is justified, it is often because of much more dire conditions that families may have felt compelled to take such steps, and, far from empowering either the bride or the groom, these incidents further disempower them. To avoid such interventions, families conduct underage marriages in another village or the dead of the night in a field, which renders the young people in question even more invisible and marginal [Nilantar Trust, 2015].

As evidenced through earlier research findings and field experience, the enforcement-focused model of creating BRCR villages, either as a stand-alone project or as a prime focus, poses more risks than benefits. Further, there is always a risk of increased communal hostility when enforcement strategy is thrust upon.

This doesn't mean that the enforcement model ought to be totally negated. It can be effective if implemented alongside other economic, educational and empowerment strategies.

…. While enforcing the law in a punitive way is unlikely to be successful in ending child marriage and may well drive child marriage underground, softer efforts to use the power of the law to deter child marriage – such as ensuring that parents sign an oath promising not to marry off their daughter of marriageable age, or spreading awareness about the wide spectrum of individuals, aside from the parents, who may be penalised for participating in child marriage – may be more useful and acceptable. [Ending Child Marriage in India, Drivers and Strategies, UNICEF, 2019]
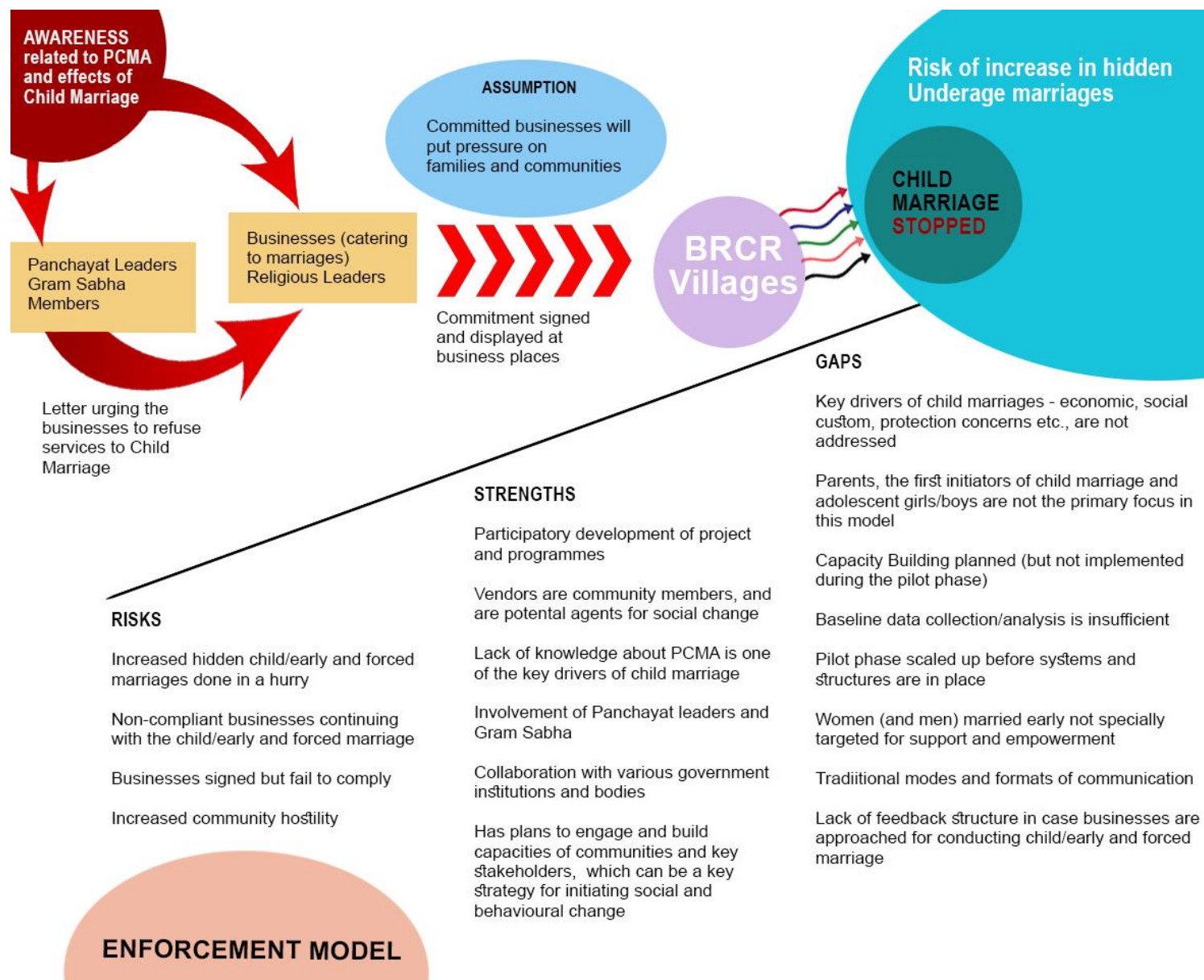
AWARENESS related to PCMA and effects of Child Marriage

Panchayat Leaders Gram Sabha Members

Letter urging the businesses to refuse services to Child Marriage

Businesses (catering to marriages) Religious Leaders

ASSUMPTION

Committed businesses will put pressure on families and communities

Commitment signed and displayed at business places

BRCR Villages

Risk of increase in hidden Underage marriages

CHILD MARRIAGE STOPPED

GAPS

Key drivers of child marriages - economic, social custom, protection concerns etc., are not addressed

Parents, the first initiators of child marriage and adolescent girls/boys are not the primary focus in this model

Capacity Building planned (but not implemented during the pilot phase)

Baseline data collection/analysis is insufficient

Pilot phase scaled up before systems and structures are in place

Women (and men) married early not specially targeted for support and empowerment

Tradiitional modes and formats of communication

Lack of feedback structure in case businesses are approached for conducting child/early and forced marriage

STRENGTHS

Participatory development of project and programmes

Vendors are community members, and are potental agents for social change

Lack of knowledge about PCMA is one of the key drivers of child marriage

Involvement of Panchayat leaders and Gram Sabha

Collaboration with various government institutions and bodies

Has plans to engage and build capacities of communities and key stakeholders, which can be a key strategy for initiating social and behavioural change

RISKS

Increased hidden child/early and forced marriages done in a hurry

Non-compliant businesses continuing with the child/early and forced marriage

Businesses signed but fail to comply

Increased community hostility

ENFORCEMENT MODEL

Figure 1: **Enforcement** Model

Moreover, the strategies and approaches must directly address the factors and drivers causing child marriages. For example, when the reasons for child/early and forced marriage is a prevailing traditional social custom, then, in the case of economically viable communities, the BRCR approach may not be relevant. For, with greater financial ability, they are better positioned to access larger, more expensive services outside the locality. Similarly, economically vulnerable families and single mothers will be forced to marry their children off, unless and until support structures are established for financial security and stability. In the case of socially oppressed communities, protection concerns are paramount and demand structural change. Behaviour/attitude change cannot be brought out unless and until the core issues are dealt with.

This calls for a target-specific, at times even micro-level at-risk family specific strategy and approach.

Key conditioning factors and drivers

Jejeebhoy, S.J. 2019. Ending Child Marriage in India, Drivers and Strategies. New Delhi, UNICEF

The India ToC suggests that there exist three overarching factors at the societal level that condition the strength with which a variety of drivers affect child marriage, namely

1. Household poverty,
2. Structure of patriarchy and gender inequality, and
3. Humanitarian crises or conflict and natural disaster situations.

And, the drivers of child marriage at the individual, family, society and system level are:

1. Manifestations of poverty at household level,
2. Discriminating gender roles, norms and gender-specific barriers,
3. Perceived lower value of girls than boys,
4. Prohibitive costs of dowry and huge wedding expenses,
5. Controls on girls' sexuality,
6. Fears for girls' safety in public places,
7. Exclusion of girls and boys from marriage-related decision-making,
8. Limited paid work opportunities for women and girls,
9. Poor quality and inaccessible facilities and services, and
10. Poor awareness and implementation of the PCMA

Based on earlier reviews, empowerment (and education) approach was both the most popular intervention used, and also the most successful, while ambiguity existed with regard to the effectiveness of the remaining approaches. (Chae and Ngo, 2017).
Source: The Global state of evidence on interventions to prevent child marriages, GIRL Center Research Brief, Sophia Chea and Thoai D. Ngo

The ideal strategy to prevent Child Marriage would be an evidence-based, target-specific, multi-component programme, which combine the Empowerment, Engagement and Enforcement model that addresses all or the majority of the drivers, and works to create Villages or Panchayats Respecting Child Rights. In this approach, all stakeholders - parents[1], community, village leaders, adolescent girls and boys, women married early[2], businesses, religious leaders, administration and educational institutions will be empowered and engaged to enforce the rights of children. The economic drivers will be addressed by increasing access to government schemes and other support structures. At-risk families will be given special focus.

The aim is to create Child Marriage Free (Or Child Rights Respecting) villages and panchayats, and in this model, Businesses Respecting Child Rights villages would be one of the sub-objectives rather than the prime objective.

1.2. Baseline and Monitoring

SBLF has undertaken participatory baseline data in about 35 villagesin which pilot BRCR has been implemented. CMT, a participatory tool developed by SBLF to measure community maturity has been done in 20 villages.

The team also expressed their difficulties in collecting data from government bodies. Being a sensitive issue, it is also challenging to gather data related to past incidents of child marriages.

SBLF has HH-level baseline information, collected usingdoor-to-door surveys and participatory discussions, which is a key strength.

The present baseline provides a Bird's Eye View of the communities and their demography, and is ideal for needs assessment and developing projects/programs. For example, the baseline has information related to the target audiences' economic status, living conditions, availability of services such as educational opportunities, ration shops and PHC within an accessible distance, etc. The data also provides information about the occupation of parents, child labour and school dropouts.

However, this data is insufficient to measure programme outputs/outcomes/impact. For example, statistics about the number of boys married before the legal age are almost absent. A decrease in school dropout and child labour could be indicators for measuring impact but would fail to reflect knowledge, attitude and behaviour changes – key indicators for measuring programme effectiveness.

As the project is in its initial stage, it is recommended to develop appropriate baseline and monitoring indicators based on the project strategy.

Indicators (sample)

- Percentage of adolescent boys, girls, and women who know their rights and entitlements
- Percentage of girls (married and unmarried) who report having a say in important decisions
- Extent to which parents envision roles and trajectories for their daughters that are beyond traditional roles of mother, wife, and home-maker
- Knowledge about different laws concerning child rights
- Men's attitude towards women learning about sexual reproductive rights
- Married and unmarried adolescent birth rate
- Number of early/child and forced marriages stopped/delayed
- Percentage of adolescent girls (married and unmarried) who feel confident in their ability to report and seek help with violence

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[1] Many of the drivers of child marriages are parents-initiated and studies have shown that strategies that actively inform, educate and (economically) empower them will lead to change in perception and behaviour.

[2] Women (and men) who are married early are often excluded from government programmes and are further socially isolated.

1.3. Communication Strategy and Content

We tailor our communication based on the context and person we speak with. Sometimes we give more emphasis to informing the schemes and opportunities. In other situations, we might focus on the laws related to child rights and marriage.

- Mahalakshmi, Facilitator, SBLF

I belong to the same locality, and the girls in my community see me as a role model. It is inspiring for them to hear about success stories and it has always worked wonders. We suddenly see a change in their interest to continue education.

- Sivaranjani, Facilitator, SBLF

Awareness creation has been an integral aspect of SBLF's approach to tackling the issue of child marriage. Assessing the effectiveness of their current practices including the sticker campaign is beyond the scope of this review, as pre-intervention data is unavailable. Also, SBLF is yet to develop a communication strategy.

However, based on the discussion with the project team, the following observations are made.

Communication Content	Communication methodology
1. Listing of problems caused by child/early and forced marriages 2. Protective laws related to Child Rights and prevention of child marriage 3. Positive role model stories to inspire adolescent girls to exercise their right to decision making 4. Government schemes supporting higher studies and employment opportunities	1. Group discussions with Panchayat leaders, adolescent boys/girls groups, vendors, workers groups and natural leaders group 2. Door-to-door 'sticker' campaigns 3. Individual one-on-one interactions [whenever possible]
Strengths	**Gaps**
1. Flexible communication approach tailored to the needs of the target audience 2. The team has clarity about the individual, social and structural issues faced by the target communities. This aids in effective communication	1. Lack of well-defined, result-oriented communication strategy and content 2. Heavy reliance on traditional formats and modes of communication 3. Lack of monitoring systems and structures to measure the effectiveness of communication strategy

Preventing child marriage and creating child rights respecting villages and businesses demands knowledge, attitude and behaviour change, and communication plays a crucial role in achieving the same. It is recommended to develop structured, result-oriented, measurable communication strategies for optimal results.

While there is a benefit to traditional formats and interpersonal modes of communication, the present times and technological advancements call for modern strategies, such as the effective use of social media and online platforms. Post-pandemic, almost 65% of households possess at least one smartphone, and are active on Instagram, Facebook, and are regular consumers of YouTube. Often, the youth aren't aware of what is right and beneficial online and rather waste time and resources consuming meaningless content. Using the same tool, parallel narratives can be created.

Thoughtfully crafted edutainment and interactive audio and video campaigns highlighting the problems and laws related to child marriage, parent-child relationship, traditional vs. modern gender roles, government schemes, as well as positive reinforcement stories narrating the success of women & men leaders, changing global & Indian social landscapes and customs, will be effective. Neutral topics such as the nature-man relationship and scientific developments could also be included.

The unique, target-specific, high-quality content could then be spread over a dedicated YouTube channel as well as via other social media pages, WhatsApp, Telegram and Chat groups. Special public screenings at schools and villages/panchayats regularly can be organised alongside popular cinema shows for optimal reach and retainment.

Social and behavioural changes have long been influenced by 'art and cultural interventions' as communication channels. Art, entertainment and cultural interventions, including film screenings, theatre performances, and art events can be organized regularly to inspire and engage the audiences. Subtle commentaries on beneficial social customs as well harmful practices can be created without being explicit and judgmental.

Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, there is a popular culture of displaying large billboards and posters. Using the same communication mode, visually striking large billboards and monthly poster campaigns can be effective in reaching out to larger audiences. Repetitive and methodical visual communication can create a sense of familiarity and positive reinforcement.

The possibility of using community radios to reach out to target communities who do not have access to smartphones can be explored.

- An independent, centrally placed expert team is recommended for developing communication research, strategy and target-specific online video/audio & print /billboard campaigns.

- Establishment of 'Common Rooms' in schools, enabling an open space for adolescents to engage in dialogues as well as to involve in edutainment activities.

- Increasing access to art, culture and entertainment as part of communication strategy, including screening of program specific campaigns alongside popular cinemas as well as theatre performances at village/panchayat level.

- Communication [and Capacity building] aspects of the project is recommended to be result-oriented, cross-cutting approaches, with age/gender segregated content to address the overarching factors and key drivers of child/early and forced marriage.

1.4. Capacity Building

SBLF has plans to build the capacities of various community organizations, village leaders, parents, youth, teachers and other influencers. During the pilot phase, participatory discussions were held toidentify the areas and thematic focus for intervention.

The aim is to bring about individual, family, community and system level changes by building the capacities of the various stakeholders in the following thematic areas:

1. How society influences Individual, family and community behaviour
2. Building knowledge about child rights, constitutions, beneficial social norms and detrimental practices
3. Unpacking structural inequalities including patriarchal gender norms
4. Role of business towards preventing child marriages

The capacity-building aspect of the BRCR project is at its conception stage right now and so it is beyond the scope of this review. In general, it is recommended that the thematic focus be fine-tuned to address the observed drivers of child marriage. The capacity building program planning must also include M&E indicators for knowledge, attitude and behaviour change.

It is recommended to include youth who were married early and capacities built to mitigate the effects of early marriage.

It is also recommended to strengthen the documentation process - for example, SBLF has gathered a lot of information through participatory interactions, however, needs assessment reports, comprehensive analysis of the baseline data, percentage-wise causes for child marriage in the target area etc., are not readily available.

Video documentation of the vendors affirming their commitment is an excellent strategy. Skills of the team/volunteers ought to be built to enhance the quality of video and other documentation. Other areas of Facilitator capacity building need to be identified and addressed.

- The objectives and expected results of the capacity building programmes need to be clearly charted out for optimal results.
- Gender/age segregated content and workshops are recommended.
- Communication and capacity building content need to be aligned for improving overall effectiveness.

1.5. Community organisations/structures

SBLF has established different community organisations, namely, the Adolescent boys and girls group,Natural leaders group, Workers group, and the Federation. Some of these groups have been functional since 2019 and have become more active in the last year, especially in the 20 villages where the British Asian Trust project was implemented.

SBLF is strong at mobilizing and collaboratively works with various government bodies and school committees to bring about change and empowerment. Ongoing and systematic capacity building of community

organisations has been done through various interventions, and SBLF has plans to further build their ability to actively respond to child rights violations. This approach is quite impressive as these community organizations are both receivers and enablers of knowledge, attitude and behaviour change. The Federation is expected to function as an umbrella structure, with select volunteers from each of the sub-groups becoming its core members. In the long run, this grass-root network could lead to sustainable results, including systemic structural changes.

It is to be noted that a 2011 review (Malhotra et al, 2011) of 23 programmes in low income countries targeting child marriage and implemented between 1973 and 2009, found that the weakest results were seen in programmes that worked only at the community or macro level – mobilising community members or changing laws and policies on child marriage. The strongest results were seen in those that worked directly with girls to empower them with information, skills and resources. Programmes focusing on two of the fundamental drivers of child marriage – lack of schooling and poverty – also showed promise, in particular to be scaled up.

To avoid gaps in results and ensure cost-effectiveness, it is recommended to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each of the community organisations and have clarity as to expectations. Accordingly, capacity building programmes can be aptly tailored to meet each of these groups needs and expected results.

For example, one of the biggest challenges faced by the Facilitators as well as the volunteers is the hostile reaction from certain communities and families. In some villages that have a closed traditional structure, even entry for any outside institutions and individuals is restricted.

We have formed a whatsapp group. It also acts as a channel for communication in case of any violations. So, these days we are able to discreetly pass on the information. They still might suspect us and we do feel the heat. But, they can't clearly pin-point who had spread the information

- *Subrahmaniyan, Volunteer (and Primary School Teacher, Velampatti)*

SBLF has been experimenting with different strategies. One such is the formation of WhatsApp groups.

This strategy could be extrapolated at the District level by networking the Federation members to be first responders (or, watch group/task force), to work alongside the organisation and 1098. Further brainstorming is needed to arrive at a functional structure as well as the role of first responders/task force.

It is also recommended to consider providing honorarium or travel cost to the volunteers, if the required roles and responsibilities demand.

2. Way-Forward Strategies and Concept

Child Marriage is a global issue with about 650 million girls alive today being married as children (i.e. 27% of the total young woman population) [March 2020, UNICEF]. With collective efforts, approximately 25 million child marriages were averted in the last decade. However, the UN has estimated that about 10 million girls are at risk of marrying early because of the Covid Pandemic. If the trend continues, by 2030, the year when we are expected to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal of "eliminating all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations", we will be forced to face an alarming 110 million girls at risk.

As per a study done in March 2022, Indian child bride accounts for 1/3rd of the global total (approximately 226.3 million children married before age 18, out of which 99.8 million were married before age 15)[3]. National Family Health Survey (2019-21, NFHS-5) statistics confirm that 12.8% of women below age 18 are married in Tamil Nadu. On average, at least 10 child marriage cases were reported across Tamil Nadu every day from January to August 2022, reflecting the overall global increase post-pandemic. In Salem, Dindigul, Perambalur, and Krishnagiri, more than 20% of women below age 18 are married, almost equalling the national average of 23%.

Socio-economic inequality and patriarchal social norms are the key drivers that perpetuate child marriage. Most often, girls and boys married early face a multitude of problems, which becomes more complicated in the case of early pregnancy, as neither of them is prepared for early parenthood. The risk of infant deaths is proportionate to the age of the pregnancy. Especially, girls face severe physical and psychological difficulties, either struggling to raise their children or facing loss. The impact of child marriage also affects different communities differently and within communities, girls tend to be victimised more. Child brides (and grooms) from marginalised communities face dual discrimination and become further marginalised. Gaps in policy and programmes on education, health and nutrition, child protection and poverty alleviation, further increase the vulnerabilities. Lack of awareness of PCMA and other acts related to child rights further augments the issue.

The complexity of the social, cultural, economic and political factors that enable child/early and forced marriages, demands a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes and drivers. SBLF proposes an evidence-based, target-specific, dynamic combination of the Empowerment, Engagement and Enforcement model that addresses the major drivers causing child marriage and aims to create Villages or Panchayats Respecting Child Rights [Or child marriage-free villages] in Dindigul and Salem Districts. In this approach, all stakeholders - parents, community, village leaders, adolescent girls and boys, businesses, religious leaders, administration, educational institutions and other influencers will be empowered and engaged to bring about sustainable changes to enforce the rights of children.

Key strengths of Empower, Engage, Enforce model

- Evidence based
- Target-specific
- Individualised
- Flexible approach
- Addresses all or major drivers of Child Marriage
- Involves all stakeholders
- Aims to bring about individual, family, community and system level changes and create model Child Marriage Free Villages

Age/gender segregated, target specific communication [edutainment and art/cultural campaigns] and Capacity Building as cross-cutting approach for creating change.

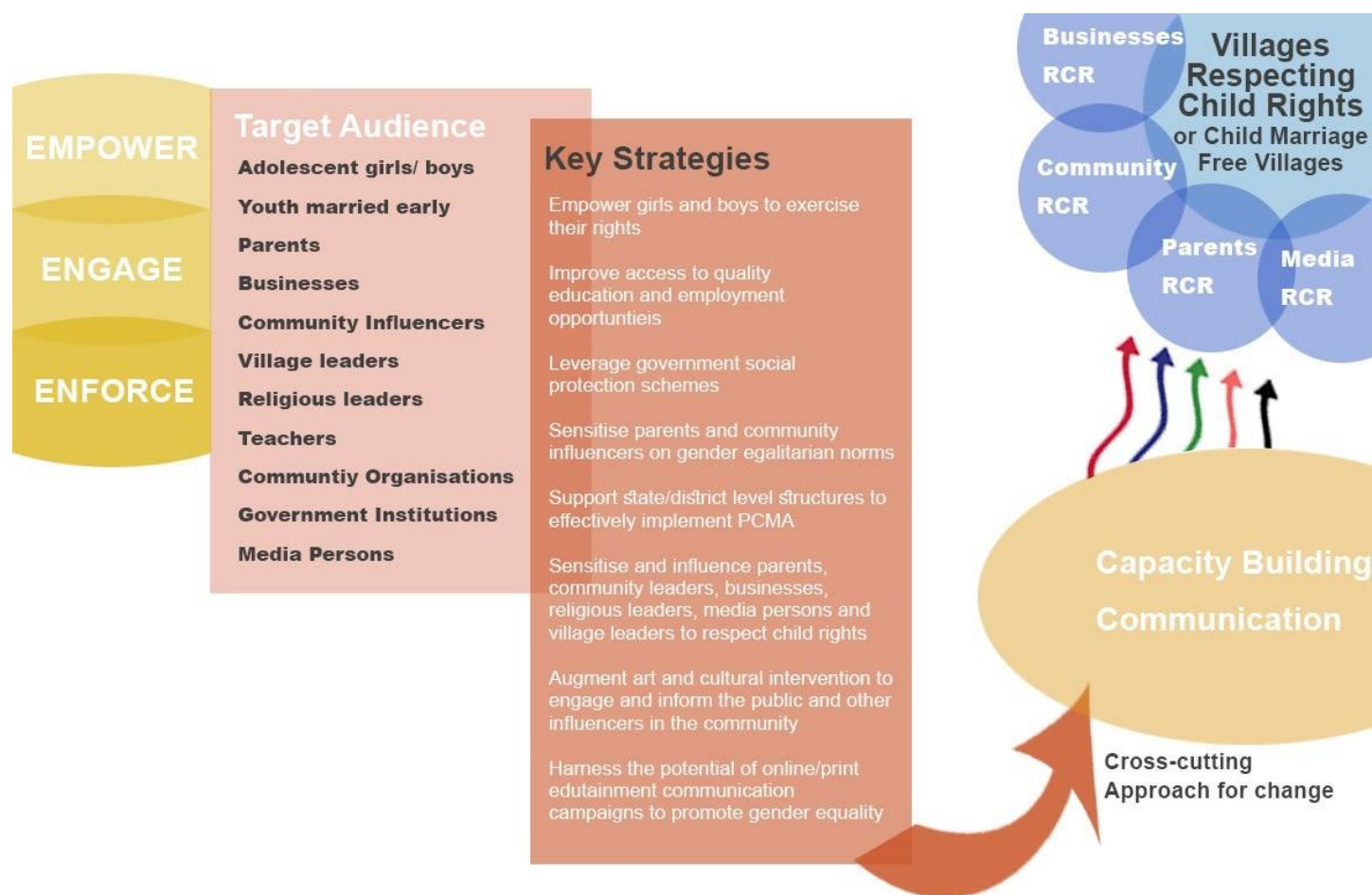[3] Covid has triggered an uptick in child marriages in India, Sravani Sarkar, The Week, 22nd July 2022 [Link]

Figure 2: **Empower Engage Enforce** Model
for child marriage
(RCR ~ Respecting Child Rights)

Five-Year Strategic Plan (For Ending Child Marriage)

Below is a broad strategic plan for empowering girls and boys to make informed choices and decisions about their life and career, and enabling an environment for a child marriage-free society. This document needs to be further developed by SBLF, based on internal policy, target region-specific requirements and donor priorities. It is also recommended to implement it in a phased manner. Some of the strategies could be implemented in collaboration with other organisations as well as advocating and lobbying with government/other relevant institutions.

	Empowerment [includes education and related economic support and/or enhanced access to government schemes and opportunities]	**Engagement**	**Enforcement**
Objectives	To provide girls and boys with the information, skills and support structures they need to advocate for themselves and improve their status and well-being	To engage and mobilise families, boys and men, youth, community members and leaders to adhere to gender egalitarian norms and uphold attitudes that reject child, early and forced marriage	To foster an enabling legal and policy framework and its effective implementation
Drivers or causes addressed	• Manifestations of poverty at the household level • Discriminating gender roles, norms and gender-specific barriers • The perceived lower value of girls than boys • Prohibitive costs of dowry and huge marriage expenses • Controls on girl's sexuality • Fears of girl's safety in public • Exclusion of girls and boys from marriage related-decision making	• Discriminating gender roles, norms and gender-specific barriers • The perceived lower value of girls than boys • Prohibitive costs of dowry and huge marriage expenses • Controls on girl's sexuality • Fears of girl's safety in public • Exclusion of girls and boys from marriage related-decision making • Limited paid work opportunities for women and girls • Poor quality and inaccessible facilities and services • Poor awareness and implementation of the PCMA	• Poor quality and inaccessible facilities and services • Poor awareness and implementation of the PCMA

Strategies	• Empowering girls and boys to exercise their rights • Improving access to quality education and employment opportunieis • Preparing older adolescent girls and boys for livelihoods and school-work transitions • Encouraging access to positive role models • Sensitising parents and community influencers on gender egalitarian norms • Establishing support network for adolescent children and women/men who were married early • Leveraging government social protection schemes • Capitalising CSR funding for enhancing quality and access to education and employment • Harnessing the potential of video-audio online/print edutainment and mass communication campaigns to promote gender equality • Advocacy and lobby with relevant stakeholders to support the implementation of the above strategies	• Harnessing the potential of online edutainment and mass communication campaigns to promote gender equality • Augmenting art and cultural intervention to engage and inform the public and other influencers in the community • Establishing a 'common room (safe spaces)' – peer group for adolescents to meet, discuss and engage (includes access to counselling, and art-cultural-entertainment activities) • Increasing youths access to sports and entertainment activities • Sensitising parents and community influencers on gender egalitarian norms • Establishing and strengthening community organisations and networks to create child marriage-free villages/panchayat • Sensitising and influencing the media persons in the region to cover child-friendly stories	• Supporting state/district level structures to effectively implement PCMA and other child rights related laws • Creating Business Respecting Child Rights Villages • Recognising villages/panchayats that are child marriage-free (monthly, quarterly and yearly basis) • Online and print communication campaigns including billboard and poster campaigns • Sensitising and influencing the media persons in the region to cover child-friendly stories
Target Audience	• Adolescent boys • Adolescent girls • Youth married early (suggested age group: 18-24) • Parents and other community influencers • Government bodies and institutions	• Parents • Adolescent boys • Adolescent girls • Youth married early (suggested age group: 18-24) • Community Organisations • Government bodies and institutions (including VLCPC) • School Administration • Media Persons	• Businesses catering to marriage including marriage halls, photographers, beauticians, wedding card printers, • Religious leaders • Panchayat leaders, Gram Sabha members and VLCPC • Teachers and SMCs • Other community influencers and media persons

Cross-cutting approach	Capacity building and communication will be target specific, results oriented, age-gender segregated and will have measurable indicators for outcome/impact.		
Proposed Activities	• Identifying government schemes and empower adolescents and parents to access them for education and employment opportunities • Establishing peer group support structure for adolescent girls and boys • Peer groups for women (and men) married early • Target specific capacity building programmes for the audiences mentioned above • Gender and age segmented and age-appropriate gender transformative life skills education and comprehensive sexuality education • Online and print communication campaigns including billboard and poster campaigns targeting adolescent girls, boys, parents, married women and workers group • Counselling services for adolescent girls/boys on sexual and reproductive health • Child protection and gender-based violence services for girls • Adolescents and parents take oath • Child parliament	• Online and print communication campaigns including billboard and poster campaigns targeting community at large • Explore possibilities of community radio as a communication channel • Screening of program specific campaigns alongside popular cinemas as well as theatre performances at village/panchayat level • Establishing common room / safe space for adolescents and youths • Capacity building programmes for various stakeholders including existing and new community organisations and network • Establishing Task group and anonymous feedback chain	• Capacity building of businesses, panchayat leaders, police and administrative authorities • Businesses commit to preventing child marriage and display the signed agreement publicly • Online and print communication campaigns including billboard and poster campaigns targeting businesses, religious leaders, Panchayat and other community influencers

Expected Outcome (samples, not an exhaustive list)	- Girls (and boys) are aware and empowered to exercise their rights - Girls access scholarship and other opportunities for higher education - Girls (and boys) have agency, hold egalitarian attitudes, have access to mentors and role models, and exercise life choices - Girls complete secondary school - Older adolescent girls transition from school to work, accessing livelihood skill-building and employment opportunities - Boys understand and support gender equality, hold gender-egalitarian attitudes and display behaviours reflecting new notions of masculinity - Girls (and boys) have the opportunity to develop solidarity with one another through peer groups and collective action - Married girls are supported, and empowered, have expanded peer networks, and are aware of health-promoting practices and rights and entitlements to do so - Parents/families supported with opportunities to improve their economical stability and security - Parents and families support gender-equal socialisation practices, discard traditional hierarchical attitudes about the value of girls, as well as positive gender-role attitudes and behaviours and a commitment to preventing child marriage - Influential adults in the community are sensitised about the need to change community norms and practices, and take action to prevent child marriage	- Girls (and boys) are aware and empowered to exercise their rights - Influential adults in the community are sensitised about the need to change community norms and practices, and take action to prevent occurrences of child marriage - Community, traditional, and religious leaders increasingly support alternative roles for girls beyond marriage. - Parents and families support gender-equal socialisation practices, discard traditional hierarchical attitudes about the value of girls, as well as positive gender-role attitudes and behaviours and a commitment to preventing child marriage - Boys understand and support gender equality, hold gender-egalitarian attitudes and display behaviours reflecting new notions of masculinity - Girls (and boys) have agency, hold egalitarian attitudes, have access to mentors and role models, and exercise life choices related to career and marriage - Girls (and boys) have the opportunity to develop solidarity with one another through peer groups and collective action - Structural impediments to girls' use of facilities, services and entitlements are reduced - Gender-responsive social protection and incentives for girls and their families in place	- Businesses, parents, religious leaders and other community influencers are aware of the PCMA and penalties for violation; and, ○ Actively refuse to engage in child/early and forced marriages. ○ Inform the concerned authorities of proposed child/early and forced marriage - Government institutions and administrative authorities actively use the law to prevent child marriage - Influential adults in the community are sensitised about the need to change community norms and practices, and take action to prevent occurrences of child marriage - Greater awareness at the community level about PCMA and other laws that protect girls and more effective use of PCMA - Police and administrative authorities are sensitised about the law and ways of using the law to prevent child marriage - Strong political support for Child Rights policies and tracking progress made

| **Outcome/Results indicators** (samples, not an exhaustive list) | • Primary, secondary, and tertiary education completion rates, by gender
• Drop-out rate in primary and lower secondary general education, by gender
• Adolescent boys, girls, and women know their rights and entitlements (knowledge change)
• Adolescent girls say they want to complete their education (attitude change)
• Percentage of adolescent girls who complete their education (behavior change)
• Adolescent girls (married and unmarried) have basic financial literacy
• Girls (married and unmarried) report having a say in important decisions
• Women report having a say in the choice of husband
• Percentage of married girls who say that they wanted to get married at the time that they were married.
• Unmarried girls confident in their ability to pursue alternatives to child marriage.
• Adolescent girls (married and unmarried) have correct knowledge of sexual and reproductive health
• Financial incentives availed to promote continuation of (or re-entry into) education among girls.
• Unmarried men (or boys) intend to marry a woman who is 18 years or older
• Unmarried men (or boys) support girl's education
• Girls (married and unmarried) report better relations with parents
• Extent to which parents envision roles and trajectories for their daughters that are beyond traditional roles of mother, wife, and home-maker.
• Degree of support for gender equitable norms about domestic chores and daily life
• Parents say that they will not marry their sons to a girl younger than 18 (attitude change) | • Parents of unmarried adolescent girls support their daughters completing their education or returning to school. (behaviour change)
• Improved spousal communication and relation
• Reduced incidents of physical or sexual violence
• Girls are better able to avoid early pregnancy and to refuse unwanted sex
• Girls feel that they can advocate for themselves
• Girls are able to report incidents of violence
• Adolescent birth rate
• Number of peer group for adolescent girls, boys, women married early and evidence stories
• Key stakeholders (parents, adolescents, young people, community and religious leaders, members of local government) believe that it is harmful to get married before age 18 (attitude change)
• Key stakeholders (parents, adolescents, young people, community and religious leaders, members of local government) know about the harms of child marriage, discrimination, and violence (knowledge change)
• Community members participate in public activities on child marriage, human rights of girls, girls' education, and violence prevention (e.g., campaigns, rallies, participatory discussions) (behavior change)
• Percentage of businesses who refuse to provide services to child marriage (behavior change)
• Schools provide safe and "girl-friendly" environments (separate toilet for girls, an anonymous complaint box, extracurricular activities for girls etc.,).
• Influential leaders and communicators (traditional, religious, cultural, political, media) make public declarations against child marriage and in support of alternative roles for girls. |

The Empowerment, Engagement and Enforcement model can be strategized to mitigate other child rights violations, for example, addiction, school-dropouts, child labor, etc., by (1) Creating Business Respecting Child Rights Principles (2) Empowering/engaging with individuals/families/communities/government to address other drivers of child rights violations.
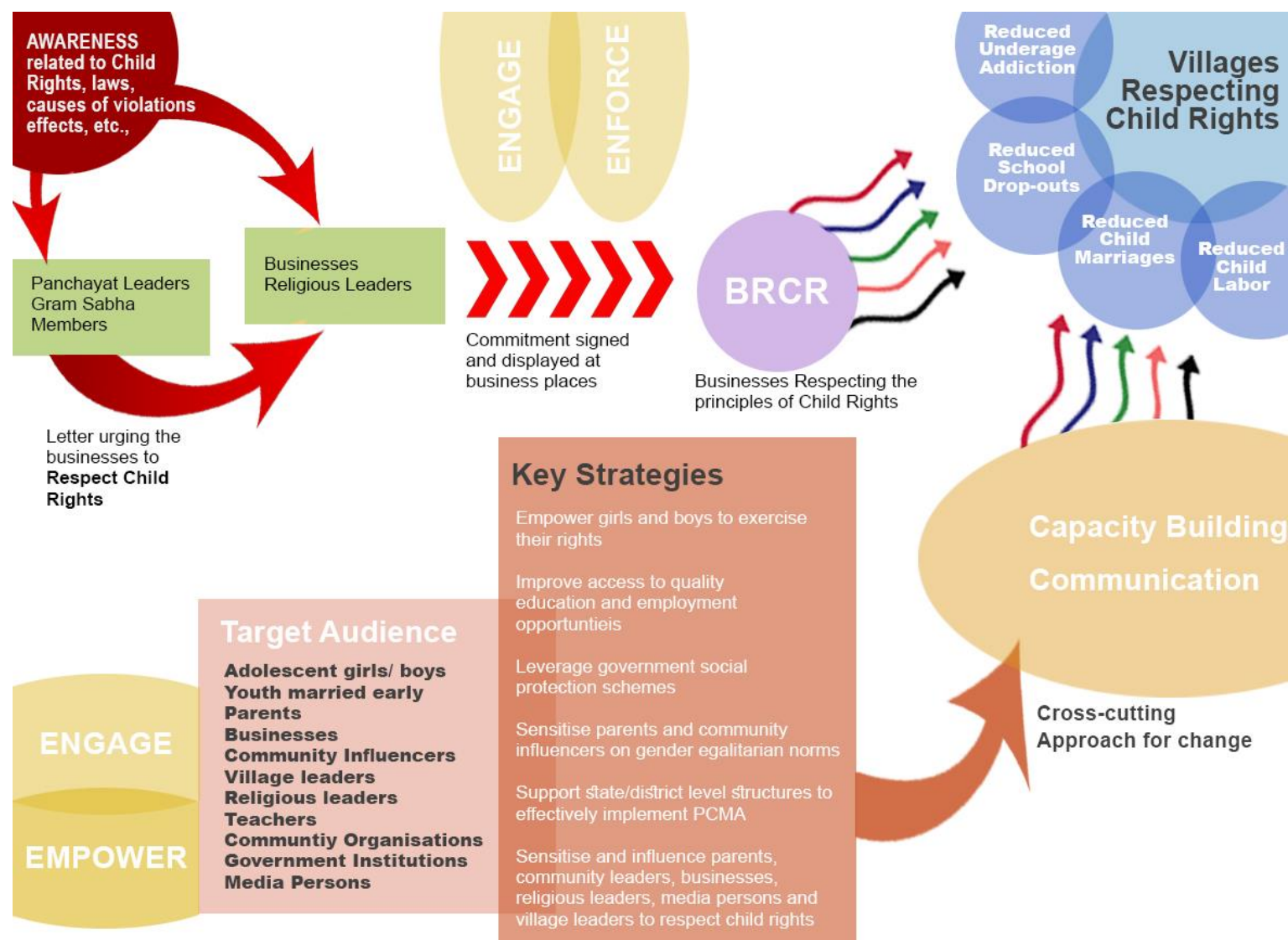

Figure 3: **Empower, Engage and Enforce** model for creating Business Respecting Child Rights

Conclusion:

The review and proposed strategic plan is based on field observations, discussions with the SBLF Facilitators, volunteers and businesses in the target area, and secondary research. It is recommended to further develop the strategic plan based on programme priorities as well as to achieve the principles underlining responsible businesses.

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Thoughts to ponder

Creating BRCR villages is recommended as one of the strategies of the 5-year strategic plan, and implemented in a phased manner. Advocacy and lobby with government and other stakeholders for achieving results that are not with in the implementation scope of SBLF.

Economic reasons are found to be the primary reason for child marriage. In the proposed plan, economic intervention is included as part of Empowerment. SBLF to brainstorm strategies to:

- Increase access to scholarships adolescent girls/boys andemployment opportunities after completing education
- Create contingency resources to support economically vulnerable families in the target area

These can also be done in collaboration with other NGOs or CSR organisations.

It is recommended to put systems and structures in place before scaling up. Action steps to be taken include:

- Initiate quantitative and qualitative analysis of key drivers of child marriage in target area
- Finalise overall implementation strategies
- Develop a baseline tool considering the programme objectives
- Complete pre-intervention data collection
- Prepare needs assessment report
- Prepare pilot phase intervention report
- Based on the baseline identify at-risk families
- Segregate and form/strengthen age-specific groups
- Develop response strategies, including communication channelwhen vendors are approached for services related to child marriage

Communication and capacity building are cross-cutting strategy/approach. It is recommended to establish an independent, centralised unit for developing communication strategies. Effective use of online and social media portals for CR related campaigns is advised.

The objectives and expected results of the capacity building programmes need to be clearly charted out to address the observed drivers of child marriage. M&E indicators for knowledge, attitude and behaviour change need to specified.

It is recommended to include women (and men) married early (suggested age-group belonging to 18-24) as a special group and support extended to them.

There is a potential risk of increased adolescent (pre-marital) pregnancy, when marriages are delayed. It is recommended to keep a track, for understanding and future intervention.

It is recommended to clarify the roles and responsibilities of community organisations – will they be first respondents/vigilant task group? What other roles they are expected to play?