

Gender

Struggling with India's gender

By Steve Bradshaw

'In many places, boys are unable to find girls to marry. Because of this, the nation will soon face an unimaginable crisis'

THE number of female foetuses being aborted in India is rising, as ultrasound is increasingly used to predict the sex of babies.

What would you do if your husband's family did not want you to have daughters - and insisted you took steps to make sure it did not happen? Would you walk out or would you stay on and take a chance? What if the bias against girls is reflected across society? Would that mean you could not make it on your own? Vaijanti is an Indian woman who says she faces this dilemma.

She lives in the city of Agra, home to the Taj Mahal, perhaps the world's most famous monument to a woman, the wife of a Mughal emperor. "I had a lot of dreams in my heart," Vaijanti says, "just

like in the movies... but now I think of love as a betrayal." Vaijanti has taken her husband to court, saying he and his family insisted that she have an abortion because a scan showed she was expecting a girl.

Having already had one daughter, she says the pressure to abort the second child was intense. So Vaijanti moved out of the marital home and now lives apart from her husband - with her two girls.

Gender skew: Testing and aborting for gender selection are illegal in India and Vaijanti's husband and in-laws deny the charges against them. Despite the obvious bitterness between her and her husband's family, reconciliation is still possible. But Vaijanti was unsure of what to do next. We wanted to find out if she thought India really is a country biased against young girls.

Despite the law, some Indians clearly are using ultrasound techniques to scan for female foetuses, in order to abort them. Figures suggest as many as a

million such foetuses could be aborted every year in India. It is unlikely nature alone accounts for this gender skew - in Delhi, for instance, only 821 girls are born for every 1,000 boys. Many Indian families regard daughters as a liability.

Expensive dowries must be arranged for their weddings and they frequently

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move into their husband's households - making it less likely they will support ageing parents. As Vaijanti had never travelled beyond Agra, director Nupur

Basu took her on a whistle-stop tour of India. In Rajasthan, she meets Jasbir Kaur, who left her husband after facing a similar predicament.

Told she should



lose courage. Don't feel alone." Although millions of Indian girls are still left out of formal education, Jasbir Kaur's three girls are doing fine in the local school.

Icon of globalisation: In Delhi, there is good and bad news.

Vaijanti meets women who have come into Delhi filled with hope, but end up begging on the streets. She also visits a disco for the first time in her life - no den of iniquity but a place where she meets some bright young women with good cheer and strong advice. In Bangalore, there are also two sides to the picture. This is the city that is world famous as an icon of globalisation and women's empowerment.

It has young girls working in IT, making good careers, and scooting

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around town on mopeds, listening to their iPods. But there is another Bangalore - where some families still demand the expensive dowries traditionally given by a bride's family to the in-laws. And while Bangalore's senior managers may encourage women, younger men may still question their qualifications and their right to work.

Finally Nupur also takes Vajjanti to Mahatma Gandhi's retreat, where she hears that the revered leader was concerned about the bias against women. Writer Tridip Suhrud says Mahatma Gandhi "would have been deeply perturbed with this entire social surge of... civilisation to acquire this hard militant, masculine self-identity". He adds: "He would have fought it with femininity."

'Grave situation': We wanted to make this film after a leading development expert, Kevin Watkins, suggested India had a curiously ambivalent role in the globalisation debate. Its booming economy is cause for hope, and the gov-

ernment is clearly concerned about both gender and economic inequality. But if huge swathes of the populace do not share the increasing wealth, the whole Indian model of development may be called into question.

Meantime, Vajjanti's immediate concern is India's missing girls - unborn because of the desire to have boys. Vajjanti and Nupur call on Renuka Chowdhury, the minister for women, who says: "This is a very, very grave situation." She adds: "In many places, boys are unable to find girls to marry. Because of this, the nation will soon face an unimaginable crisis."

When Vajjanti left Agra she was quiet but watchful. At the journey's end, she is calm and eloquent as she weighs up whether to seek reconciliation with her husband's family. "I feel at peace... I will go back to Agra now and think about what I should do for my daughters and myself. I will go back and think about my decision." **COURTESY BBC NEWS**