



The HEAR study:

participatory research exploring how Gurkha & Fijian veterans of the UK Armed Forces describe their experiences

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Foreword

Understanding the experiences of UK Gurkha and Fijian veterans has previously been an overlooked area of research. By funding this research project, we wanted to tackle the gap in understanding of transition to civilian life for these cohorts and their families, so that the impact of their service could be better understood, any changes needed could be identified and addressed, and support improved where required.

Using a community-engaged research approach to interview Gurkha and Fijian veterans from different generations, the research sought to identify the experiences of military culture and support, alongside an analysis of quantitative data to compare health symptoms of Gurkha, Fijian and a diverse group of British ethnic minority personnel with a white British comparison group. Through this, the research aimed to provide a better understanding of the risks and protective factors for the wellbeing and social inclusion of Gurkha and Fijian personnel who served in the UK Armed Forces.

The findings of the research highlight the unique health and wellbeing barriers experienced by Gurkha and Fijian ex-Service personnel, and some distinct mental and physical health outcomes. They also show that those serving more

recently face heightened challenges when compared with British Service personnel. Importantly, the report includes recommendations for addressing both legacy and current issues, including the need to review how MOD policies that target unfair treatment and discrimination are implemented at a local level, and how better access to services and clear, timely immigration support in and after service is required. With an increased focus on non-UK personnel and families, and an improved understanding of their needs, these cohorts can be better supported.

We believe this timely and insightful report has the potential to become a tool for advocacy by third sector and community organisations who can draw on the evidence presented on areas of concern that require changes in policy and practice. We recognise and welcome the progress being made by the MOD but urge greater prioritisation of the issues and action to address changes in practice as well as policy. We look forward to using this report to help inform better collaboration between Defence and third sector services, and to seeing it used as a means of helping to empower veterans and their families.

Michelle Alston,
Chief Executive, Forces in Mind Trust



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Abbreviations

Armed Forces Pension Scheme (AFPS)
British Gurkha Standards Instruction (BGSI)
Chain of Command (CoC)
Community-Engaged Research (CEnR)
Department of Work & Pensions (DWP)
Gurkha Offer to Transfer (GOTT)
Gurkha Pension Scheme (GPS)
Indefinite Leave to Enter (ILE)
Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR)
Ministry of Defence (MoD)
National Health Service (NHS)
Patient, Public Involvement & Engagement (PPIE)
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA)
Royal Air Force (RAF)
Royal Navy (RN)
United Kingdom (UK)
Welfare Officer (WO)

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Executive Summary



There is increasing attention upon the challenges facing ‘non-UK’ (formerly known as Commonwealth & Foreign) personnel of the UK Armed Forces in academic research, campaigns and public awareness. However, the communities existing under the ‘non-UK’ banner are diverse and have complex histories and relationships to the UK Armed Forces. This mixed methods study sought to investigate the specific issues facing personnel from Nepal (largely serving as British Army Gurkhas) and Fiji (as an example of Commonwealth member state) from their time in the military and beyond. Within this project we:

- Analysed quantitative data drawn from the King’s Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) to compare physical and mental health symptoms of i) Gurkha, ii) Fijian and a iii) diverse group of British ethnic minority personnel with a white British comparison group.
- Employed a Community-Engaged Research approach (CEnR) to interview Gurkha and Fijian veterans from different generations to better understand how historical and contemporary examples of discrimination impact veterans and their communities to this day.

In our quantitative analysis, we found that the ethnicity of our samples was related to different physical and mental health symptoms. This may relate to differences in patterns of reporting or differences in health needs¹. We found that Gurkha and the British ethnic minority samples

reported better physical and mental health compared to a white British sample. Fijian personnel in our sample demonstrated more of a mixed picture, reporting higher levels of certain somatic symptoms and traumatic stress symptoms. It must be noted that this was a predominantly serving sample and sample sizes were small so results cannot be generalised.

The interview component of the study supported this complex picture by highlighting Fijian and Gurkha veterans’ areas of strength, as well as various hardships, including mental health challenges. In particular, the study shed light on:

Serious discrimination of Gurkhas serving before 1997. Gurkha participants described being disadvantaged by a series of systemic caps upon their length of service, slower tracks for promotion, extended periods of family separation (over years), and unequal entitlements to benefits (e.g. National Insurance, family separation allowance and pensions). Some of the issues raised within this report have since been resolved; for example, parity of pensions was given to those serving post-1997 (but not before 1997), changes to immigration regulations granted eligibility for those serving before 1997 to apply for the Indefinite Leave to Enter (ILE) in 2009, and the substantial costs for the Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) application were reduced for personnel in 2022.

¹The analysis took into account other factors, such as age and deployment status.

We observed how unfair historical policies still impact an ageing Gurkha veteran population. These caused distress, affected earning potential and now this cohort struggles with financial problems and difficulties accessing benefit entitlements (e.g. state pension), and health, social and welfare services.

For those serving more recently, Gurkha and Fijian personnel share many challenges affecting British military personnel (family separation, injury, barriers to promotion, stressors relating to military-to-civilian transition), but these experiences are complicated by i) their position as ‘other’ in a predominantly white British institution and ii) exposures that do not affect British personnel (e.g. longer periods and distances from family and key supports; persisting attitudes of racism in service and local communities; deployment restrictions related to non-UK passports, navigating immigration processes for themselves and for their family members).

Gurkha and Fijian military personnel recounted instances of achievement and resilience that define their military service and in which they take pride. However, these may, in part, be attributable to coping with discriminatory practices in recent history and the present.

Challenges included examples of mistreatment; the need to prove themselves above and beyond other British recruits; overcoming barriers to promotion; striving to attain a level of rank that will allow them to bring family to the UK and additional hurdles surrounding residency and family separation.

The following section outlines the different cohorts we interviewed, their contexts and how these relate to recommendations from the HEAR study. A full list of recommendations is included on page 41.

Gurkhas who served and left before 1997	Gurkhas who served before 1997 and left after 1997	Gurkhas who served after 1997 and Fijian personnel serving after 1998
Context		
<p>Lifelong impact of lower pay, unexpected military discharge and lower pensions affecting quality of life.</p> <p>Moved to the UK in 2009 but often experienced financial problems and difficulties accessing health, social and welfare services.</p>	<p>Served during the transfer of the Gurkha base from Hong Kong to the UK. Experienced some improvements (equal pensions for those serving since 1997). Equal terms and conditions for employment introduced from 2007.</p> <p>However, ongoing examples of discrimination and unequal pensions for years served before 1997.</p>	<p>Improvements made but still experiencing differential access to career opportunities preventing candidacy for promotion.</p> <p>Gurkha personnel specifically unable to apply for ILR until 18 weeks before discharge causing compounding problems at point of transition.</p> <p>Both groups paid high costs for ILR (before waivers introduced in 2022).</p> <p>Issues surrounding family separation and support for families.</p>

Gurkhas who served and left before 1997	Gurkhas who served before 1997 and left after 1997	Gurkhas who served after 1997 and Fijian personnel serving after 1998
Recommendations		
<p>Recommendation 2: MoD and DWP to address enduring differences as a result of historic pension inequalities faced by Gurkha veterans serving before 1997.</p> <p>Recommendation 3. Access to services and clear, understandable and timely information and support post-service. This can involve Third Sector reviewing current reach and services provided to ageing Gurkha veteran population; developing more collaboration with pre-existing Gurkha networks (3.2 and 3.3). Increased funding needed to support these community networks (3.4).</p>		<p>Recommendation 1: A review of how policies targeting unfair treatment and discrimination are implemented on a local level, including 1) the delivery of JSP 763 regarding incidents of discrimination and racism; 2) the implementation of career management policies for ‘non-UK’ v. British personnel comparatively.</p> <p>Recommendation 3: Access to services and clear, understandable and timely information and support in service and post-service, including targeted advice on issues of recruitment, training, immigration and military-to-civilian transition (3.1). Defence and Third Sector to collaborate with Fijian and Gurkha networks (3.2); Third Sector to review its services to non-UK veterans and families (3.3) and increased funding for community networks (3.4)</p> <p>Recommendation 4: Focusing upon the needs of non-UK families, including how this is considered within the UK Armed Forces Family Strategy (2022-2032). This can include a consultation with families and Tri-Service Family Federations; extending the ILR waiver to family members and more research in this population.</p>



Report



Introduction

Although white British personnel form the majority within the UK Armed Forces, ethnic minority groups accounted for 11.2% of the UK regular forces as of April 2024 (1). Of this percentage, 40% of personnel were not from the UK. Indeed, the military has a longstanding policy of recruiting overseas in times of shortage, drawing from Commonwealth countries (particularly Fiji) and Nepal. Overseas recruitment has been rooted in a British Imperial notion of employing so-called ‘martial races’ to protect its possessions and supplement the Armed Forces during both World Wars (2, 3). From 2000 onwards, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has recruited widely from the Commonwealth when presented with the challenges of meeting diversity targets and the advent of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. In addition, the MoD made more concerted efforts to increase diversity of the workforce and recruit more British ethnic minorities personnel into the UK Armed Forces(4).

Data from the Service Ombudsman show, however, that complaints relating to discrimination and harassment are disproportionately higher for ethnic minorities personnel than white personnel (39% of complaints made by ethnic minorities personnel compared to 24% of white personnel) (5). This stands alongside a growing awareness of the unique challenges affecting ‘non-UK’ Armed Forces personnel, veterans and their family members. Among these are systemic inequalities relating to career progression; strain upon family relationships; obstacles in obtaining UK residency and citizenship and having to navigate

complex transitions and identities as military migrants (6-12).

There are some commonalities that ‘non-UK’ personnel experience; for instance, being a minority in a British institution and being subject to immigration law. However, the specific circumstances of Gurkha and Fijian personnel highlight the distinctive histories and contexts of communities that sit under the broad umbrella of ‘non-UK’ personnel.

Context of Gurkha and Fijian personnel in the UK Armed Forces

Gurkhas have a long history within the UK Armed Forces and were first recruited in 1815 to increase manpower during colonial expansion (13). As a core element of the British Indian Army from 1857, British Army Gurkhas continue to be recruited from specific hill districts in Nepal into regiments separate from other units of the UK Armed Forces. The transfer of the Gurkha headquarters from Hong Kong in 1997 marked a shift in their relationship to the UK. Thereafter, the Gurkhas were based in Shorncliffe and other parts of the UK such that personnel and family members became increasingly integrated in the UK.

A series of campaigns and hunger strikes put pressure upon the UK government and UK Armed Forces to improve Gurkha’s conditions (e.g. pay, pensions and terms of employment) and increased public awareness and support (14). It was only in 2007 that Gurkha personnel (serving since 1997) were eligible to apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) in the UK, providing

they had served at least four years in the military. In 2009, Gurkha personnel who had served and left the military before 1997 became eligible to apply for Indefinite Leave to Enter (ILE) or ILR, meaning many Gurkha veterans moved to the UK in later life (15)². Whilst Gurkha personnel serving on or after 1 July 1997 were offered the Gurkha Offer to Transfer (GOTT) in 2007, which equalised pension entitlements to match those received by British personnel (the Armed Forces Pension Schemes of 1975 and 2005), this offer was not extended to those who retired from the military before that date. This has become an enduring source of disagreement between Gurkha veterans and the Ministry of Defence. A series of investigations, including three judicial reviews, consultations and a case brought to the European Court of Human Rights have all found in favour of the Ministry of Defence and as such, military service before 1997 remains remunerated under the 1948 Gurkha Pension Scheme albeit augmented by welfare uplifts (16).

Fijian personnel were recruited by the UK Armed Forces in both World Wars but have been embedded in UK units since 1961. At the end of National Service in 1960, 212 indigenous Fijian men and women were employed to supplement the workforce (12). British colonial rule of Fiji ended in 1970. Between 1987 and 2006, a period of political and economic instability created difficulties for the indigenous population (17). In 1998, the UK military initiated a second wave of recruitment of Fijian personnel which continues to this day. Whilst Fijian personnel were not employed under different terms of

service like Gurkha personnel, residency issues are prominent within the community. A famous case in 2020 saw how eight Fijian personnel sued the UK Government for bureaucratic errors and insufficient/incorrect advice which meant they lived illegally in the UK once their visas had expired (18).

Fees for the ILR application were waived in 2022 for those who have served at least six years, however this did not apply to retrospective cases, previous applications were not reimbursed, and the change did not apply to family members (19). The changes outlined above represent significant progress but are partial remedies to the parity for which Gurkha and Fijian veterans and their wider communities are still campaigning.

Rationale

Awareness of the issues faced by ‘non-UK’ personnel is increasing, however there has been little systematic study into how these challenges have affected the health and wellbeing of specific groups under the ‘non-UK’ umbrella. Focusing upon two communities in particular, this project sought to understand how historical legacies and contemporary examples of discrimination have affected Gurkha and Fijian personnel and veterans, and their communities. Concentrating upon two specific communities further allows for the identification of overlaps and distinctive features affecting UK-based diasporas arising from the UK Armed Forces’ transnational recruitment practices. Cross-learning from the two may be useful in improving outcomes for all ‘non-UK’ personnel.

²As reported in the UK Human Rights Blog (2016) approximately 90% of eligible Gurkha personnel (N=2,230) serving since 1997 have successfully qualified to settle in the UK with their qualifying dependants. Since ILR was extended to those retiring before 1997, approximately 35% of those eligible have since applied.

Aims

This study investigated the mental health and wellbeing of Gurkha and Fijian personnel and veterans of the UK Armed Forces using both survey data and qualitative interviews. The aims are as follows:

Quantitative aims: To compare the physical and mental health symptoms of different ethnicity samples of the King's military cohort study.

This analysis assesses the potential differences in symptoms reported by ethnic groups within the King's Centre for Military Health Study (KCMHR)'s cohort study. Gurkha, Fijian and British ethnic minorities personnel were compared with a white British sample. Despite other evidence of ethnic inequalities in the experience and outcome of mental and physical illness more generally (20, 21), there is a dearth of research into the links between ethnicity and health outcomes in a UK Armed Forces context.

Qualitative aims: The aim of the qualitative component is to explore the experiences of Gurkha and Fijian veterans relating to:

- 1) Military culture, support, treatment and discrimination;
- 2) Residency/citizenship issues;
- 3) Psychological impacts of these experiences.

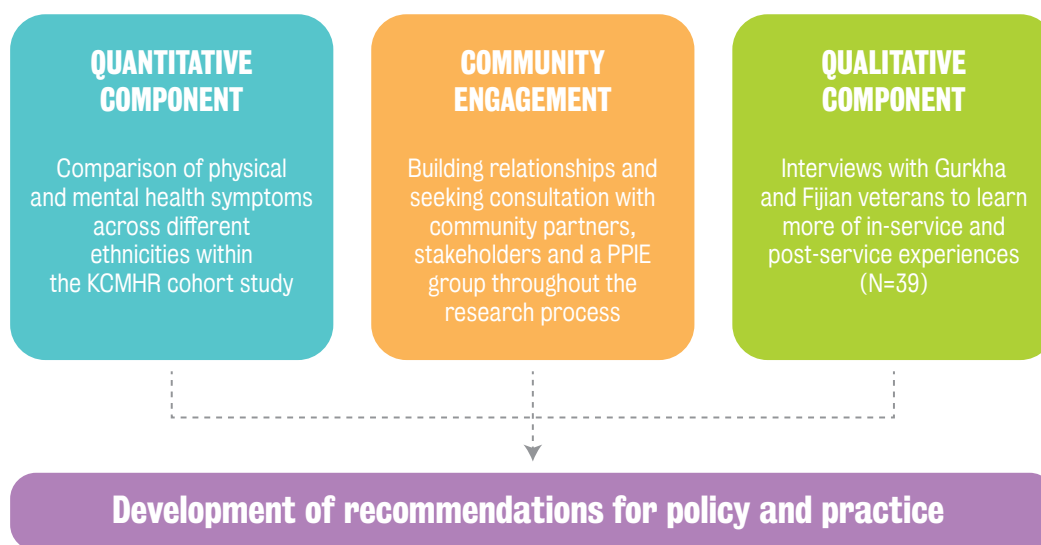
The qualitative component takes into consideration different generational experiences to capture changes to policy, practice and attitudes over time. The qualitative component uses the inquiries above as a route into understanding how imperial models of management, and how subsequent improvements, impact Gurkha and Fijian veterans and their communities.



Methods

This project is a mixed methods study comprising three different elements:

Figure 1. Mixed methods design of the HEAR study



Quantitative methodology

The quantitative component of this project compared physical and mental health symptoms across different ethnic groups within the KCMHR cohort study dataset.

Data

A secondary data analysis was performed using four phases of data (phase 1, 2004-6 (22); phase 2, 2007-9 (23); phase 3, 2014-16 (24) phase 4, 2022-24 (25)) from the KCMHR cohort study which has tracked the health and wellbeing of UK military personnel since the Iraq War in 2003. Each phase used questionnaires to collect a range of demographic and military characteristics, as well

as data on health and social outcomes. The current analysis included participants who participated at any of the four phases of the cohort study.

Samples

Four different samples were created using nationality and ethnicity information recorded by UK Defence Statistics:

1. A Gurkha sample (N=254)
2. A Fijian sample (N=112)
3. A heterogeneous sample of British ethnic minority participants (N=178)³
4. A comparator sample of white British participants (N=254)

³Defined as participants with a British nationality and any of the following ethnicities: 'any Chinese background', 'Asian Bangladeshi', 'Asian Indian', 'Asian Pakistani', 'Black African', 'Black Caribbean', 'Mixed Asian and White', 'Mixed Black African and White', 'Mixed Black Caribbean and White', 'other Asian background', 'other Black background', 'other Ethnic background' or 'other mixed ethnic background'

Participants were included if they were male, Army personnel and were serving/ had served in enlisted or Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) ranks. Women, other service branches and Officers were not included in the analysis as there were not many participants with these characteristics in the smaller samples used in this analysis. We further ensured that the roles of the white British sample were similar to the Gurkha sample⁴ and that there were similar proportions of serving and ex-serving participants across all samples.

Analysis

We ran logistic regressions in Stata v.18 to explore whether ethnicity was associated with over forty physical and mental health symptoms. Health symptoms were drawn from the validated measures of the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-15) ; PTSD Checklist – Civilian Version (PCL-C) (26) and General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) at phases 1-4 (27). Rather than estimating levels of disorder, we instead focused upon specific individual symptoms. This allowed us to draw from all four phases of data and broadened the number of participants we could include. If participants reported any of the symptoms over the four phases, they were counted as a positive reporting of a symptom. The analysis controlled for other factors that could explain ill health; for example, we adjusted for age, deployment status (yes/no) and if participants had single or multiple data points. This allowed us to take into account whether participants with more phases of data had more opportunities to report a symptom.

Community engagement

The qualitative component of this study was strongly influenced by our engagement with community partners, stakeholders working within military and veterans' support and a Patient & Public Involvement & Engagement (PPIE) group that included Gurkha and Fijian veterans

and family members. The present project was influenced by the principles of Community-Engaged Research (CEnR), which promote the involvement of community members in the research process (28). This had numerous benefits:

- ♦ **Building relationships and shaping the research:** it was important to develop trusting relationships with those the report sought to help and to ensure our inquiries and approach were directed by the priorities of our community partners. We therefore strove to apply a CEnR principles as much as was feasible given the resources and parameters of the project. For example, our community partners, PPIE group and stakeholders advised us on i) what areas to pay attention to in our work; ii) any relevant political and cultural sensitivities we should take into account; iii) the wording used in the participant-facing documents and the interview guide. It was also suggested that we expanded our study inclusion criteria to use a translator in order to include Gurkha personnel who needed support with English and who may be most impacted by the inequalities outlined in this report. Finally, some participants, PPIE members and other stakeholders were invited to a stakeholder event to hear the research findings and help develop recommendations.
- ♦ **Supporting recruitment:** through our contacts we were able to advertise the study more broadly and build trust with local communities.
- ♦ **Addressing the implicit hierarchical power relations in academic research:** a CEnR approach acknowledges the expertise of those with lived experience. Whilst the current research team had experience producing research about ethnicity and health (2, 29-31), the team did not include Gurkha or Fijian veterans. A commitment to CEnR was therefore especially important.

⁴Role in parent unit were categorised as combat, engineering, logistics, communications and miscellaneous category of service support roles, e.g. administrators

Qualitative methods

Recruitment and data collection

Participants were recruited through on-site visits to events and community centres, through community partners who acted as gatekeepers, by sharing the research advert with stakeholders (e.g. military charities like Help4Heroes), snowballing techniques and on social media platforms. Participants were eligible if they were Fijian or Gurkha veterans who served as regulars in the UKAF and who were not born in, but now live, in the UK. Gurkha personnel were oversampled to recruit a broader age range and to capture the effects of changing conditions and policies over time.

We constructed a semi-structured interview guide that was informed by ongoing conversations with community partners and PPIE meetings, yet the topics of interviews were often led by participants. Interviews were conducted by EJ and LP on the telephone, on video-calls or in-person depending on participants' preferences. Almost all Fijian interviews were conducted via video calls and almost all Gurkha interviews were conducted in-person at the site of Folkestone Nepalese Community Centre (FNCC) (although we also interviewed some Gurkha participants from other areas via video call). Audio data were collected and

transferred to a secure environment and transcribed through an independent transcription company that had a confidentiality agreement and third-party agreement for data sharing.

Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data (32). This approach places significance upon how participants experience and interpret life events and also takes into account the interpretive lens of the researchers. There were multiple strands of qualitative data, which formed a multi-layered analysis (Figure 2).

Ethics

Ethical approval was provided by the King's College London Health Research Ethics committee [HR/DP-23/24-36557]. A risk protocol was followed that included a follow-up call with a clinical officer in the event of a support need. The interviewers ensured participants felt comfortable in their interviews, monitoring potential psychological distress and following up with participants where necessary. A token of thanks was given to participants (£25 e-voucher) and PPI members (£20 e-voucher per session) for their contributions to the project.

Figure 2. The three aspects of qualitative analysis used in the HEAR study



Findings

Quantitative results

The quantitative component of this project compared physical and mental health symptoms across different ethnic groups within the KCMHR cohort study dataset.

Sample descriptives

- All samples were male, Army regulars and non-officers⁵ and almost all were still serving as regulars according to their last recorded serving status (95% of Gurkhas, 99% of the Fijian sample, 92% of the British ethnic minorities sample and 95% of white British sample).
- Most of the samples were aged 18-29 years old when first entering the cohort (72% of Gurkhas, 67% of the Fijian sample, 54% of the British ethnic minorities sample and 66% of white British sample).
- Most white British and British ethnic minorities participants were non-commissioned officers (NCOs) at their first recorded rank (67% and 70% respectively). Over half of Gurkhas (53%) and less than half of Fijian (42%) participants were NCOs.
- Most had deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan (69% of Gurkhas, 83% of the Fijian sample, 79% of the British ethnic minorities sample and 77% of white British sample).
- Most of those deployed had believed they were in danger of injury/death whilst on deployment (90% of Gurkhas, 85% of the Fijian sample, 88% of the British ethnic minorities sample and 89% of white British sample).

Symptom analysis

In comparison to the white British sample⁶:

Gurkha sample were:

- More likely to report avoiding activities or situations that reminded them of a prior stressful experience.
- Less likely to report feeling distant or cut off from other people, feeling emotionally numb or being unable to have loving feelings, trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, feeling irritable or having angry outbursts, concentration difficulties and feeling jumpy or easily startled (PCL-C items).
- Less likely to report concentration difficulties, losing sleep over worry, feeling under strain, not playing a useful part in things, not enjoying normal day-to-day activities, not being able to face up to problems, feeling unhappy or depressed, feeling worthless, feeling unhappy, losing confidence in oneself (GHQ-12 items).
- Less likely to report joint pain, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, bowel changes (constipation and diarrhoea), trouble sleeping, feeling tired/low energy, forgetfulness and nausea/gas/indigestion (PHQ-15 items).

Fijian sample were:

- More likely to report suddenly acting or feeling as if a stressful experience were happening again (as if reliving it), feeling upset when reminded of a stressful experience and avoiding activities or situations that reminded them of a prior stressful experience (PCL-C items).

⁵Women, other service branches and Officers were not included in the analysis as there were not many participants with these characteristics in the smaller samples used in this analysis.

⁶Analyses accounted for age, deployment status, and whether participants had single/multiple data points on each symptom.

- Less likely to report trouble falling or staying asleep (PCL-C).
- Less likely to report not playing a useful part in things, feeling constantly under strain and feeling unhappy or depressed (GHQ-12 items).
- More likely to report dizziness and double/blurred vision (PHQ-15 items).
- Less likely to report nausea/gas/indigestion and trouble sleeping (PHQ-15 items).

The sample of British ethnicity minorities personnel

- Less likely to report sleeping difficulties, irritability and angry outbursts and concentration difficulties (PCL-C items).
- Less likely to report concentration difficulties and losing confidence in oneself (PHQ-15 items).
- Less likely to report trouble sleeping (PHQ-15 items).

Summary:

- Gurkha, Fijian and the British ethnicity minorities samples in our analysis reported different combinations of somatic and

psychological symptoms when compared with a white British sample.

- Gurkha personnel in our sample self-reported better physical and mental health than white British counterparts and were less likely to endorse a range of post-traumatic stress and depressive/anxiety symptoms. There was, however, minor evidence of post-traumatic stress symptoms relating to avoidance.
- Fijian personnel in our sample were more likely to report some somatic (relating to dizziness and vision) and post-traumatic stress symptoms compared to white British counterparts, but also had better physical health and fewer anxiety/depressive symptoms.
- The British ethnic minorities sample reported some symptoms of better physical and mental health overall.

Please note, care must be taken in the interpretation of these findings due to the small sample sizes and self-report data.



Qualitative findings

Who we interviewed

In total, we interviewed 25 Gurkha and 14 Fijian veterans of the UK Armed Forces. All 25 Gurkhas served in Gurkha units (though some had later re-joined after leaving regular service as reserves and others worked in British Army units since transfers were allowed after 2009). Of the Fijian participants, 13 were in the Army; one participant was in the Royal Air Force (RAF) and one participant served in all branches over their military career. All participants, apart from one, were male.

Narratives collected were multigenerational, particularly for Gurkha participants, and included those in their thirties and in their eighties. We interviewed veterans who served in the 1960s through to the 1990s when Gurkhas were based abroad in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei; these included servicemen who had engaged in jungle warfare in the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation and who experienced the most discrimination reported by our participants. This cohort moved to the UK in later life once

immigration regulations changed in 2009. We also interviewed Gurkha veterans who served more recently, when improvements to pay, pension and residency processes had been implemented.

With regard to the Fijian participants, we interviewed those who had enlisted in the second wave of Fijian recruitment in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as those who enlisted when the Fijian presence in the UKAF was more established. To preserve the anonymity of participants, a demographic table detailing exact ages, roles and ranks is not included within this report. However, participants varied in rank and role, from private to major, and served in a range of roles, from being in the infantry to military police.

Themes

Findings were summarised by six themes. These are explained in the following section, along with participant quotations and case studies. Participants' pseudonyms are labelled and have a participant number.

Figure 3. Thematic structure from the qualitative component of the HEAR study



Theme 1: Injustices and discrimination within the military

Both Fijian and Gurkha participants recounted instances of unfair treatment, ranging from racist incidents to systemic inequalities that prevented personnel from accessing the same opportunities as their British counterparts. Our interviews indicated that Gurkha veterans serving before 1997 faced the most discrimination which continues to impact them today. This theme therefore starts with the experiences of this cohort.

Inequalities in pay and entitlements

Gurkhas' different terms of service were implemented by the Tripartite agreement of 1947 (9) and conditions were often determined by British Gurkha Brigade Standard Instruction (BGSI) rather than British Army law. Gurkha personnel therefore received lower salaries, which was unknown to those we interviewed until British colleagues raised these inequalities. Furthermore, Gurkha personnel were not eligible for the family separation allowances received by British personnel when both were stationed away from their families (e.g. in Hong Kong). Despite making financial contributions, some participants reported receiving invalid or 'dummy' National Insurance numbers meaning that payments were not recorded⁷ (33), thus blocking them from accessing benefits and/or a UK state pension post-service.

Not being able to reach specific ranks or to serve as long

Historically, their separation from other units of the UK Armed Forces meant Gurkha units had different standards for promotion and length of service which produced systemic caps on their careers. For example, Gurkha personnel could not serve for longer than 15 years unless reaching the rank of corporal. Once having completed 15 years of service, Gurkha personnel could enter the Gurkha Pension Scheme (GPS) (34). Some

participants we interviewed were discharged from service before the 15-year threshold, because of manpower cuts. Achieving a higher rank conferred a better pension and being able to bring one's family to their posting, however promotions in Gurkha units were slower.

Pension inequalities

Inequalities (but mostly pension inequalities) caused considerable distress for those we interviewed. Gurkha participants who retired before 1997 shared their dismay at not receiving the same pensions as their British counterparts, a result of the 1947 Tri-Partite Agreement. This also applied to those who served in the military after 1997, but only in terms of years of service prior to 1997 which continued to only count as a quarter to a third of a year in terms of pension entitlement (equal pension rights applied for years served after 1997). Many veterans felt that their contribution to the UK Armed Forces was devalued. The following quotation demonstrates the ripple-effects of such inequalities upon the trajectories of participants and their family members in comparison to the prospects afforded to British personnel:

"Translator: What he feels sad about is the same friend who served in the British Army together... they became a soldier together... he had a high living standard... But [the Gurkha participant] himself, he couldn't get past that poverty line... The sad thing is that both of them served in the British Army at the same time... He feels humiliated." (Gurkha participant 23)

"The unfortunate thing is that I did 24 years and I'm getting a pension for 9½ years... All my service before 1997 is counted three to one and that is ridiculous." (Gurkha participant 7)

Issues surrounding pensions and quality of life for older veterans living in the UK are further outlined on p. 26.

⁷A technical committee set up by the UK and Nepalese government responded to this issue. They concluded that the provision of an NI number did not guarantee that payments were made and declined to backdate NI credits. This is disputed by the participants we interviewed and who stated that their payslips suggested sums were deducted from their pay. The Government's position was that providing credits would set a precedent for claims by workers of other nationalities who did not pay contributions.

Unexpected military discharges

Participants recounted multiple instances when Gurkha support was no longer needed and personnel were discharged unexpectedly from the military or as a penalty for errors or as a collective punishment⁸ (35). In these cases, personnel did not receive adequate notice, compensation or pension, receiving only a small gratuity covering travel costs to return to Nepal. This often occurred as participants approached the 15-year mark when they would otherwise have been entitled to receive a pension.

Physical abuse and collective punishment

There were descriptions of physical punishments, particularly during training, and participants described having to live in poorer conditions in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia than British personnel also stationed at these bases.

Speaking English was discouraged/ prohibited

Participants serving at earlier periods explained that they were discouraged, and in some cases, prohibited from speaking English in service. This was to support the British officers assigned to Gurkha regiments who were required to complete BNLC (Basic Nepali Language Training). Gurkha personnel therefore learned to write Nepali in Roman script to help British officers. Over time, learning English was encouraged for operational effectiveness however, for this era of Gurkha veterans who have since moved to the UK, this practice led to language and literacy problems:

“That is also one of the really ‘injustice’ things. If the people wish to speak English should be given opportunity but at that time by the BGSi we are not allowed to speak English with our officers. If we spoke English with them, we were punished.” (Gurkha participant 5)

“Communication in English is not easy to come without good practice. Learning the way of doing business. Lots of things. It’s a huge mountain to climb for me because the Gurkhas were not infantry soldiers not exposed to outside” (Gurkha participant 18)

Enduring inequalities

Whilst some of these conditions outlined above have significantly improved over time, it was evident that discrimination and racism was still experienced by both Gurkha and Fijian participants. A prevailing example given by both samples was significant barriers relating to career management and accessing opportunities required for promotion.

Barriers to careers

Most participants reported points in their careers where they failed to receive a recommendation for promotion despite meeting criteria, passing relevant qualifications and outperforming colleagues:

“The few years I was there people come up and they get stuck there or they get sent somewhere else. But they won’t promote any coloured person over that rank.” (Fijian participant 4)

“I had to do extra things just to get under the spotlight, if you know what I mean.” (Fijian participant 12)

A female participant we interviewed further described the intersectional discrimination she, and another woman, faced by missing out on promotion after maternity leave:

“It was one thing being a woman it was another being a coloured woman at that time... I think there was a bit of discrimination there because obviously the guy who got promoted he was British and there was actually two of us that was overlooked and we were both coloured.” (Fijian participant 7)

Participants attributed unfairness around career management to a few “bad eggs” (Fijian participant 12) in middle ranks who failed to implement the MoD’s policies fairly. Yet, there was evidence that these issues were more systemically ingrained. Gurkha and Fijian participants described being placed in physical roles (e.g. infantry, Army rugby, physical training) where they could not accrue the necessary management experience for promotion or where they became injured, causing interruptions to their careers or medical discharge.

⁸According to Gould (2000), examples included being dismissed for wanting to convert to Christianity when Hinduism was compulsory. One of the most serious incidents reported was referred to as the ‘Hawaii incident’ where, in April-May 1986, 111 Gurkhas in a battalion of Gurkha Rifles were dismissed for an attack on a British major and a Queen’s Gurkha officer in Hawaii since the assailants could not be identified.

“That is one thing that most Fijians get injured is playing rugby.... I didn’t progress at the speed that I had at the start. But I was satisfied looking back” (Fijian participant 14)

As well as facing discrimination from the British Chain of Command, Gurkhas further experienced another hierarchy based on the caste system⁹ (8) making it hard for some participants to transfer to other British Army units, to access deployment or training opportunities and to be promoted:

“I am a little bit educated from the village in my time. But I cannot get a promotion because the Gurkha officer know my village or relative” (Gurkha participant 17)

“Everybody should feel proud to be a Gurkha. They shouldn’t be suffering with the caste based system or anything like that. It should be just by their performance.... That’s our weakness (Gurkha participant 9)

A culture of racism and differential treatment

Participants observed that places with a larger Nepalese and Fijian presence were more inclusive, open and friendly. Participants recounted examples of supportive leadership who went above and beyond to help personnel access opportunities or resources, and many recognised improvements in the Armed Forces’ policies and an increasing focus upon equal rights and fairer practices:

“I think it’s changed now the way because freedom of speech now coming through the Army, the human rights. I think Fijian are more vocal and making noise from their corners they can be heard as well.” (Fijian participant 11)

However, participants from both groups recounted racist incidents and encounters by members of the local civilian communities, civilians on deployment and other military personnel:

“To be honest the discrimination is still much, much alive, even though it’s a zero tolerance, zero policy in the Army. Not only in the Army I have experienced that as well in civvy street. It’s still there. It’s much, much alive. It’s still alive.” (Fijian participant 9)

Some believed that changes to policies and greater social acceptance did not equate to actual equality on-the-ground. A Gurkha participant, for example, described not being treated with the same authority as British personnel of equivalent position:

“Being treated differently by soldiers to me that is explicit, that is obvious... Like officers ignoring me... being valued that was also an issue. So when they are talking to officers... and I say some suggestions... they are not responsive to my suggestions.” (Gurkha participant 4)

“Training that we do with D&I [diversity & inclusion], it’s a tick box exercise... D&I is not on a special day treatment kind of thing. No. D&I should be 365 days, 24 hours, that’s it... I told them it’s a sad thing to see that it is slowly changing... the fact that it is slowly changing is appalling.” (Fijian participant 12)

Other participants spoke of how ongoing cultures of inequality stem from the exploitation of foreign recruits and, more broadly, the imperial history of the British empire:

“Colonialism is still in the bloodstream of British” (Gurkha participant 4):

“[on not feeling valued by officers] That... became a habit... from the hierarchy. Because the way they see Gurkhas is like a slave in the British Army and treating us that way” (Gurkha participant 6)

Theme 2: Military pride and achievements

Co-existing with stories of discrimination, participants reported significant pride in their military records and satisfaction with what they had achieved in the UK Armed Forces. Participants referred to the sense of honour of being part of a strong tradition and legacy of military resilience (*“The demand of our prestigious and historic of our fathers and grandfathers” – Gurkha participant 14*):

“As a veteran I’m so proud, so happy with what I’ve achieved so far. Joining the British Army” (Fijian participant 5)

⁹Pariyar (2018) notes how the military has enforced the caste system back in Nepal

Participants recounted surviving extreme conditions, including the arduous and traumatic experiences of combat in the jungle through to the most recent Iraq/Afghanistan conflicts, and were proud of specific achievements when in the military. Additionally, participants described their successes; Fijian participant 10 explains the bittersweet moment of his 'achievement' below without being able to share this with his family members:

"I can say that I was one of those motivated, enthusiasm individual when I join up because I was the best recruit when I passed out... And it was a very emotional time for me because I stood there when I went up to receive my best recruit trophy and being far away from Fiji I just wished my mum and dad or any close family was there with me to witness this achievement." (Fijian participant 10)

Participants often felt that their experiences in the military prepared them for building a successful life post-service, strengthened their character and had a strong influence upon their sense of identity.

"I used to say there is no Gurkha nation I'm Nepalese. But now I'm more into Gurkha than Nepalese because I feel I've earned it. This is my life so this is who I am" (Gurkha participant 3)

Stories, overall, were often complex, expressing both feelings of deep belonging and also exclusion. In this regard, many participants were able to acknowledge the positive aspects of their military experiences alongside disappointments, anger and feelings of injustice. For example, Gurkha participant 5 explained that his unfair dismissal "ruined a good life" but also he recognises:

"My 15 years Army service life what I did, what I learnt, that knowledge, that experience helped me after I retired from the Army I went to Nepal":

"We were happy to serve in the British Army... that was good facility, good opportunity to earn money and to earn a lot of experience. But during that period, we were exploited" (Gurkha participant 5)

Theme 3: The toll of family separation

Family separation is a feature of military life for many military personnel. However, this was more severe for the Gurkha and Fijian participants we interviewed because of the transnational distances separating family members and restrictive policies.

Longer periods of separation across greater distances

This was deemed one of the most distressing issues affecting participants. Gurkha participants, for example, explained that their family members were only able to live with them on postings when they reached the rank of colour sergeant (a policy that changed in 2007 according to a participant in our study); otherwise, Gurkhas were able to go on home leave for 3-6 months approximately every three years. Often participants left young spouses and children after enlisting (usually under 20 years old for Gurkha participants) and therefore missed much of their children's childhoods. One Gurkha recounted his son's behaviour:

"What's painful was when I got home on holiday he used to hide away. He thought I was a ghost. Can you imagine what would happen. It was very painful." (Gurkha participant 13)

One of our community partners also noted that the ramifications of distance has led to rifts in family relationships that are noticeable to this day. Participants were driven to stay in service longer for the economic welfare of the family and therefore family separation was lengthened. Gurkhas further pointed out that they were not eligible for the same family separation allowance in Hong Kong as British personnel were able to access, despite similarly being posted away from their families.

Family separation also impacted the Fijian participants we interviewed. For example, a Fijian participant described loneliness and homesickness, which led to problems with alcohol.

"That's why on the weekend when everyone going home, when we are in camp it was lonely. I was very lonely. That's why I resort to drinking". (Fijian participant 3)

Support for family members

Participants described how difficulties continued when their spouses were able to join them on their postings. Spouses thus emigrated from Nepal or Fiji away from their extended family and community networks, struggled with language barriers and were sometimes based in alienating military environments:

“It’s one of the hardest decisions that the wife go through... Nothing did she know about the place. And little did I know about the [Northern Ireland]. And then we were put right in the it’s more like a heat of the moment of our life. Still not settled yet and then I was told to go. I leave the wife behind. And then little time to contact due to the security, the high level of threat in NI. We find it hard. But sometimes we don’t talk about it.” (Fijian participant 13)

Participants described this was made worse when spouses were ‘married unaccompanied’ (i.e. when personnel are deployed or on a posting and living outside of the family home) and managing childcare alone without family support:

“Imagine for a 19 year old and a 20 year old, their wife coming over and the wife is left there and the husband goes off with a little baby. It’s so unfair to us. So unfair. There is just so much paperwork just to get our parents over to come when we have a baby, when our wives have a baby. So unfair. Then we’ll have our mates, because we’re living in the same quarters... their mum coming from Newcastle” (Fijian participant 6)

Some participants noted that their family members experienced more precarity than themselves by virtue of not being exempt from immigration control in the same ways as serving personnel:

“But it’s still a struggle for dependents, our wives because now I still hear some of the spouses are still on a visitor’s visa, which is really hard to be honest, because they came at a time that they didn’t meet the threshold or the criteria of ILR. So they have to stick to a visitor’s visa” (Fijian participant 14)

Participants referenced key supports for their families; in particular, family welfare services and the Tri-Service Families Federations:

“I got shot but it was hard for my wife as well with a little baby. But the Army, my regiment with the welfare they really supported me and my wife.” (Fijian participant 2)

Theme 4: Creating a stable life in the UK

Obtaining either ILE or ILR was a central pillar in creating a stable life in the UK. This theme encompasses i) barriers for Gurkhas serving pre-1997 to resettle in the UK after their military service, and ii) the stressful and expensive processes experienced by both Fijian and Gurkha participants to attain ILR for themselves and family members.

Firstly, narratives captured the changes to immigration regulations over time and this depended upon the period participants served. For example, Gurkha participants serving before 1997 had to return to Nepal or emigrate to other countries after leaving the military, and then come to the UK in later life. We heard how participants of this era now lived in the UK on their limited Gurkha pension (and did not always qualify for state pensions) whilst struggling with English language skills and digital literacy, making it very difficult for them to independently access support services. Gurkha participants from younger generations expressed concerns for the elderly Gurkha cohort and noted their reliance upon underfunded and oversubscribed voluntary services, such as community centres.

“We don’t have that fund to spend on old people because they are not economically active, not contributing. We focus more on children, families but actually older generations of people who have been working hard to build this country, they are in their 90s and 80s and they are left, they are forgotten. They are treated so bad in this country now” (Gurkha participant 2)

Secondly, participants serving more recently experienced other issues surrounding their residency. Most of our sample applied for ILR around the point they were being discharged from

the military. Whilst serving ‘non-UK’ personnel are exempt from immigration control, personnel are not always aware of changes to their immigration status when leaving the military, leaving them at risk of deportation (7). As a result of the lack of clarity surrounding immigration processes, many participants tackled immigration issues at the point of their military-to-civilian transition, meaning most had to manage an arduous and expensive process at the same time as finding a new job and financial and housing insecurities and a minority faced risk of deportation. This occurred alongside managing ILR applications for participants’ wives and children, causing significant stress and expense for many participants:

“But for my wife it was quite hard because she can’t speak English so that was different. For me it’s expensive, it’s expensive but it was OK for me. I didn’t have any problem to apply for citizenship because as long as you can speak English and read and write it doesn’t matter.” (Gurkha participant 1).

Obtaining ILR was a linchpin upon which many other facets of the military-to-civilian transition relied. This is demonstrated best by Gurkha participant 2 who left the military without ILR and faced a tight deadline to remain in the UK. He paid substantial legal fees to support his case, whilst his local authority deemed him as making himself ‘intentionally homeless’ by leaving Defence accommodation. Only his family could be given council housing. The strain and debt resulted in him becoming homeless and the breakdown of his marriage. Fijian participants similarly indicated that the pressures of obtaining citizenship led to relationship breakdowns. In contrast, participants who could secure ILR more seamlessly experienced better outcomes, and were better able to find employment and housing making their military-to-civilian transition less arduous.

“I had to navigate on my way, but I was lucky I had that work permit which is licence to get back to UK and get going...” (Gurkha participant 3)

“I didn’t find any problems with my visa because when I was still in the Army I applied for my naturalisation and my British citizenship. Then when I left, I’d already got my citizenship.” (Fijian participant 2)

Participants described difficulties navigating the complicated bureaucracy of applications, linguistic barriers in understanding the policies and paperwork and a lack of awareness of changes to policies and processes. There were also examples of participants receiving erroneous information. For instance, Fijian participant 9 was informed by a welfare officer (WO) that he and his family would be deported during his medical discharge. Once obtaining support from Royal British Legion and SSAFA, and reporting this to the Chain of Command (CoC), he found a place to live in England and the WO was demoted.

Participants in both groups described a preference to rely upon their communities for support with these processes, but this led to sometimes receiving erroneous information from well-meaning friends:

“There’s a process that’s already been set in place about information about your pension and housing and all that... But like I said most of us Fijians we are not used to, how would I put it, to socialise especially with a different – we are only comfortable amongst ourselves. So we always getting third hand, fourth hand information because we don’t, the cultural and the language barrier is an obstacle for us so we always get information from our own mates who continually mislead us.” (Fijian participant 5)

Fijian participants recommended that personnel are made aware in service that they should apply for ILR at the earliest point possible (after four years of service) and not to leave this until when they discharge from the military. This is possible for Commonwealth soldiers, however Gurkha personnel are not able to apply for ILR until they are approaching discharge, thus creating greater pressures for Gurkhas at the point of military-to-civilian transition.

Some Fijian participants referred to other citizenship models, such as those of the Australian Army, where citizenship is granted to foreign soldiers after a set period of military service.

“But I think it’s only fair for the British to look at us less we are their home, we fight for the country, we stand in the frontline fighting for our country... I think this is the big clue of how or why you can say or why I am saying we are unfairly treated... we know how other foreign Army are doing... foreigners come and join the Army they are given their papers straight away... It’s automatic. It should work that way... they are given a passport, you are a citizen of the country because you served.” (Fijian participant 8)

Theme 5: Coping with hardship

Narratives were varied, with some participants describing how they have overcome hardship and developed happy and stable lives, and others were still living with difficulties. This included the elderly Gurkha cohort, but also some Fijian participants, especially those living with deployment-related mental health problems. Overall, however, the capacity to cope with hardship resonated across the groups. Participants linked this to a “do or die” attitude (Gurkha participant 19) cultivated from their military experience (Theme 2), but also their Nepali and Fijian cultures and the challenging conditions of early upbringings. Some described the relative privileges they experienced comparative to those in their home countries:

“I think that was our life, we’re not stressed out, we’re not expecting anything better because that’s how we were engineered, that’s... our privilege... so I accepted that as life. I was still privileged than so many of my friends back in Nepal...growing up in the mountains gives us that tenacity to keep going. We have seen hard things in life.” (Gurkha participant 3)

The capacity to cope with hardship was also explained by participants as a direct response to the discrimination faced in service. Participants

suggested that endurance was an adaptive response to being historically habituated to poor treatment in the military, and that surviving unfair practices was a suffering that had become assimilated into the traditions of the ‘Gurkha’:

“You had to work twice as hard. But you have to accept and keep on going, keep fighting, keep trying your best” (Gurkha participant 6)

“When I was in the Gurkhas I didn’t feel that, because that’s the way of life isn’t it, but now when I compare the British life here and the Gurkhas that was some sort of torture. Rather than the discrimination, a kind of torture... If we didn’t go through that torture, that sort of discrimination making you soldier probably wouldn’t be able to survive for more than 200 years”. (Gurkha participant 22)

“[On family separation for over three years] That is our culture but that was cruelty I think... that was our tradition... Everybody knew that we have a hard time because our families are there and we are here. But nobody said anything.” (Gurkha participant 1)

Some participants explained how cultural norms and behaviours (e.g. respect, not speaking out against hierarchy and not complaining) were taken advantage of and instrumentalised by the UK Armed Forces:

“We were reluctant to complain about them and they knew that. But at the same time it really build us up because if you are able to go through that on your own you can go through anything I would say.” (Fijian participant 5)

“Your supervisor, the corporal... they took advantage of us, they exploited us because they probably had experience with Fijians, because our culture is we will always be tolerant and just accept it... So you are thrown right into the heat” (Fijian participant 3)

“They used to take the Gurkhas everywhere in the war. Because they used to obey whatever they said so they just took them”. (Gurkha participant 20)

Psychological impacts described by the sample

Gurkha participants who were older and retired before 1997 often did not explicitly refer to mental health problems, potentially due to different cultural and generational understanding. However, the sadness and distress linked to their treatment by the military was evident and had a strong influence upon their wellbeing to this day. The complexity of this is evidenced by a participant who still struggled with memories of jungle warfare from the Indonesian war, alongside feeling that he does not belong in the UK:

“Translator: Finally, he says, I’m remembering that all the warfare he had obviously he feels very sad... He feels landless, helpless but he is surviving. He’s moving. I mean what can you do with that sort of thing?” (Gurkha participant 21)

The psychological impacts of discrimination also appeared to affect participants’ mentality, confidence and led to one participant internalising a sense of inferiority:

“You are always minority, you are always second class citizen... That kind of complex, inferiority complex is always with you. The

shadow is always with you...What I said is not for everybody’s mind. Even they subconsciously, unconsciously, are unaware...of the situation... They think again this is normal”. (Gurkha participant 4)

Mental health problems cited by the participants were linked to the stress of the military-to-civilian transition and severe combat exposures and ranged from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcoholism, suicidality and depression to paranoia. Those struggling with mental health issues often received some form of professional care, yet participants placed emphasis on their own forms of coping; for example, focusing upon work, their families, community support, exercise, reading and writing books, playing music, and for Fijian participants especially, drawing upon their Christian faith:

“[On his transition] There’s a lot of things on my plate... sometimes you are thinking of commit[ing] suicide or something like that but I was blessed and also I started to join the Fijian community going to church and that’s a big part of the Fijian community. I then started going to church and that really helped. (Fijian participant 13)



Theme 6: Being heard

Theme 5 explained how participants' cultural values and behaviours may have encouraged their compliance in service and prevented them from making complaints¹⁰. Gurkha participants, in particular, described not being able to speak out about discriminatory practices in service due to the lack of facilities at the time, fears that they would be dismissed or that this would sully the reputation of the 'Gurkha':

"There was nowhere to complain. Nowhere to complain, nowhere to go." (Gurkha participant 23)

"If you complain definitely, they were not happy. Once you do complain I think that's it even though they don't send you to Nepal all the career, all the posting is gone, you have to stay within the barracks." (Gurkha participant 1)

Service complaints were sometimes initiated by participants but later dropped, or complaints were made in 'off-the-record' talks with their Chain of Command.

Self-advocacy strengthened once participants had left the military. Many participants continued to raise awareness of issues affecting their communities through campaigning, volunteering, engaging in research, working in support sectors and writing books about their experiences.

With regard to the Gurkha pension issue, most Gurkha participants we interviewed continued to feel unsatisfied and unheard by the government around the financial exclusions of Gurkhas serving pre-1997 from the GOTT:

"Translator: He's saying a lot of them are still fighting for the right for the pension but he says it's like a small dog shouting at a big dog and the big dog is not going to listen to the small dog. Ongoing process but nothing will happen he's saying." (Gurkha participant 19)

"More than 30 years past... the MoD is saying thank you, very good point, you are now injustice

we will consider it. They say that but they are not implementing anything. And they are expecting OK wait let them die, let them die, let them die" (Gurkha participant 5)

It was evident that the 'pension issue' was crucial for Gurkha participants, who wanted their years of service to be acknowledged in the same way as their British peers. The following quotation demonstrates how the esteem in which Gurkha soldiers may be held is seen as a substitute for structural equality:

"They can praise us like that without giving equal rights" (Gurkha participant 12)

Fijian personnel felt strongly that struggles surrounding ILR applications outlined on p.30 (ie relating to costs, which have now been partially addressed, and a lack of information about the processes) places enormous pressure upon Fijian people and their families and, as a result, some participants felt that they were being treated dismissively:

"To be honest even if I have a red passport or blue passport - now this is really big coming out of my mouth right now - we are still classed as a second-class citizen. Our say, our voice will never, ever going to be heard" (Fijian participant 9).

Concerns around being heard (and/or the confidence to speak) were also cited by Fijian participants in relation to help-seeking for residency/citizenship issues, housing and social support. Participants shared their struggles to approach services and to understand technical information in a second language, indicating a shared preference to be able to communicate and be communicated with in their own languages in order to be understood/understand.

"I think we love to share things that we ask the right place or the right people we share things with them" (Fijian participant 13)

"Hearing and expressing in Fijian is better – [we] can better understand" (Fijian participant 4)

¹⁰ Whilst this mostly affected Gurkha personnel serving pre-1997, we found that Gurkha personnel were not always aware of the complaint procedures. In addition, a Fijian participant described how his grievances were not followed up since management changed or moved on.

Issues faced by different cohorts of our sample

Table 1: a summary outline of the issues faced by different cohorts of participants in our sample.

Gurkhas who served and left before 1997	Gurkhas who served before 1997 but left after 1997	Gurkhas who served after 1997	Fijian personnel serving since 1998
<p>Based abroad for the whole of career.</p> <p>Experienced jungle warfare in the Indonesian war; lower pay; unexpected military discharge and remained on the Indian rate pension, which continues to affect their quality of life.</p> <p>Entered UK from 2009 under the Tri-Partite Pension system, but struggle to access health, social and welfare services (somewhat due to language and literacy challenges in part from being prohibited from speaking English while serving) and mainly supported by local communities.</p> <p>Issues surrounding family separation when families remain in home countries (for substantially longer periods than contemporary conditions) and lack of support for families when joining personnel on their postings.</p>	<p>Served during the movement of the Gurkha base from Hong Kong to UK.</p> <p>Deployments to Falklands, Bosnia, Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan.</p> <p>Subjected to similar discriminatory policies that capped Gurkha career progression.</p> <p>Given GOTT for years served after 1997 but remain on the Tri-Partite pension system for earlier service.</p> <p>Most able to secure stable employment and quality of life in the UK from 2005.</p> <p>Issues surrounding family separation when families remain in home countries (for substantially longer periods than contemporary conditions) and lack of support for families when joining personnel on their postings.</p>	<p>Based in the UK in Gurkha units but can transfer to other units after 5 years of service</p> <p>Deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.</p> <p>Pension the same as British Army schemes.</p> <p>Still experiencing differential access to career opportunities preventing candidacy for promotion</p> <p>Considered Nepalese citizens whilst in the Brigade so cannot apply for ILE until moved into British Army units or shortly before discharge creating more pressure at the point of military-to-civilian transition</p> <p>Most paid high costs for ILR (before waivers introduced in 2022)</p> <p>Issues surrounding family separation when families remain in home countries and lack of support for families when joining personnel on their postings.</p>	<p>Based in the UK in general Armed Forces units</p> <p>Deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan (high levels of combat exposure)</p> <p>Still experiencing differential access to career opportunities preventing candidacy for promotion</p> <p>Can apply for ILR after 4 years of service</p> <p>Most paid high costs for ILR (before waivers introduced in 2022)</p> <p>Issues surrounding family separation when families remain in home countries and lack of support for families when joining personnel on their postings</p>

Discussion

The HEAR study sought to understand the impacts of historical and contemporary discrimination upon Gurkha and Fijian personnel. There have been significant developments in the management of Gurkha and Fijian personnel over time according to our participants, community partners and evidenced by changes to policies over time (36). Our quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that Gurkha and Fijian military personnel and veterans exhibit positive psychological outcomes in some areas, but some remain impacted by negative experiences (past and present) as demonstrated by our interview findings. Looking over interview narratives as a whole, it appeared that the unfair practices of recent history continue to reverberate in-service, producing persisting cultures of racism (e.g. incidents of racist abuse, expectations of compliance among Gurkha and Fijian personnel, and not being treated with the same authority nor able to access the same opportunities/resources for their career management). This lends support to the notion that imperial practices residually impact modern-day working environments in the UK Armed Forces (2).

Overall, the study's focus on two specific communities provided insight into some commonalities that can be experienced by 'non-UK' personnel, alongside cultural, political and historical idiosyncrasies that give rise to different types of discrimination. This project has shed light on the following:

Compounded inequalities experienced by Gurkhas serving before 1997

Rulings to date on the issue of Gurkha pension inequalities focus upon pension rates for particular

periods of service and the rank of the veteran and whether this is justified¹¹ (37). Our findings point to a larger picture: unequal terms of service that gave rise to a host of discriminatory practices which affected participants' economic and psychological welfare. For example, caps to length of service, fewer promotional possibilities, unexpected redundancies and lack of access to learning English (exacerbated by a prohibition of speaking English during service), which not only affected pension entitlement, but meant Gurkhas received lower salaries, could not afford the same education for their children as British personnel, damaged participants' future earning potential, and affected the trajectories of themselves and their families beyond their time in the military. Our findings add to literature that outlines the problems 'non-UK' personnel and veterans face in accessing support services (38) by highlighting the multiple barriers this elderly cohort face in terms of financial difficulties and English and digital literacy issues, which are currently being addressed by resource-limited local community networks.

Additional challenges for Fijian and Gurkha personnel

Fijian and Gurkha personnel have some parallel experiences to British personnel; for example the strains of family separation, barriers to promotion, reluctance/stigma surrounding submitting service complaints and the pressures to remain stoic in the face of challenges. Yet, these issues are accentuated for Gurkha and Fijian personnel who are potentially being subjected to racism and discrimination relating to their ethnicity, their immigration status and the transnational distance

¹¹According to the UK Parliament (2024), the result of consultations and judicial reviews between 2003-2024 is that Gurkhas serving pre1997 should remain on the Gurkha Pension Scheme (GPS) on the basis that the ILR in the UK was not available during their period of service, thus the pension entitlement reflects the expectation that Gurkhas would return to Nepal.

from their family members. In this report, we have identified issues that still appear to affect Gurkha and Fijian personnel, namely:

- Barriers to the implementation of equal career management policies that affect their career opportunities and possibilities for promotion;
- Family separation when families remain in home countries and challenges when family members are reunited on postings;
- Struggles in obtaining ILR, paired with managing the difficulties of military-to-civilian transition.

These findings are in accordance with other reports based on ‘non-UK’ personnel samples (6, 7). Our quantitative findings further signalled that ethnic groups within the broader category of ‘non-UK’ personnel may experience, or report, different symptoms of physical and mental health. The better physical health demonstrated by Gurkha personnel in our analysis tallies with the strict recruitment processes to enter the UK Armed Forces. The differential profiles of traumatic stress exhibited by our Fijian participants may be linked to greater combat exposure as a result of being in front-line roles (although deployment status was adjusted for in this analysis), but could also relate to discriminatory practices or additional challenges experienced around residency and family support. Due to the small sample sizes, we cannot overgeneralise our findings, though this does signal future research is needed to learn more about symptom patterns and how these might relate to factors specific to the diversity of ethnic groups within the UK Armed Forces.

The strength and skills of our interview participants was apparent, and many attributed this to the hardships they experienced. This suggests that individuals developed strong adaptive mechanisms to handle their changing circumstances as ‘other’ (i.e. being non white British and consequently of less equal value) in

a white British institution. However, some work on resilience has critiqued this concept as coming from a European-centred academic perspective, not fully accounting for the harms and realities of oppression and racism and equating ‘resilience’ to ‘inaction’ (i.e. compliance) (39). Whilst ‘resilience’ is generally framed as a positive psychological and social outcome, its origins may need careful consideration in certain contexts.

Lastly, it is noteworthy that participants’ experiences were highly multifaceted and did not communicate a singular story of injustice. For example, how discrimination manifested, was defined and was responded to varied across the Fijian and Gurkha samples, but also across generations. In addition, narratives of victimhood were not apparent in the study; some who had experienced the worst discrimination also recognised positive aspects of their military careers and the opportunities that they had been given. The nuanced situation of Fijian and Gurkha personnel warns against the tendency to use binary categories such as healthy/pathological, or hero/victim.

Strengths & limitations

- A mixed methods perspective utilised different types of data to understand the physical and psychological experiences of two large cohorts within the category of ‘non-UK’ personnel.
- A focus upon Gurkha and Fijian personnel specifically allowed us to explore, in more detail, the specific circumstances affecting these communities. Indeed, this responds to calls to look at specific minoritised groups separately rather than to reduce categories to a white/non-white or UK/non-UK binary.
- The Community-Engaged Research principles of this project helped us to devise a research programme that centred on the priorities of those affected by the issues raised in this report. This

research supports the notion that individuals facing adversity are not incapable of voicing their concerns, but that white majority societies, and their institutions, must be open to ways of listening (40-42).

- ♦ The issues raised reflect the opinions and experiences of participants, but also reflect positions and experiences common to other 'non-UK' groups published in other reports (6, 7). Our findings may have broader applicability and relevance to other populations of 'non-UK' personnel.
- ♦ The narratives offer formal accounts of historical injustices and thus stand as important archival documentation of the experiences of Gurkha cohorts serving in the mid-late 20th Century.
- ♦ A more developed participatory model was not possible given the resources allocated to the project, precluding the employment of peer researchers with lived experiences to help conduct the research.
- ♦ We lack quantitative variables that measure discrimination, bullying or harassment and so were unable to link symptoms to these experiences. Furthermore, we could not ascertain whether differences in symptom profiles reflected differences in experience or how symptoms are reported and how questions are understood/interpreted.
- ♦ The small sample sizes limit the generalisability of the findings.



Recommendations

Some of the concerns raised by this report are ‘legacy’ issues, no longer being relevant to present or future cohorts of the UK Armed Forces. However, they continue to impact significantly on the quality of lives of veterans we interviewed; for them these are not historical problems but are contemporary harms which have had enduring impact upon their families and communities.

We have designed recommendations, in collaboration with a range of stakeholders at an event hosted in January 2025, to reflect the differing needs across the groups we interviewed. The recommendations are summarised in Table 2 (p.45), while the differing needs were summarised in greater detail on Table 1 (p.37).

1. A review of how policies targeting unfair treatment and discrimination are implemented on a local level.

Our study suggests that the aims of the MoD’s current Defence strategy (36) to increase representation of ethnic minorities personnel in the UK Armed Forces must work in tandem with improving the inclusivity of working environments and practice ‘on-the-ground’. We suggest:

1.1 A review into the delivery of JSP 763 to assess whether incidents of discrimination relating to race, ethnicity, colour, nationality and national origin are responded to appropriately, whether allegations are treated seriously, and prompt actions are taken to investigate and remedy these (43).

1.2 A review into how career management policies and practices are applied to Defence personnel of different ethnicities in service.

We recommend tracking career trajectories in comparison to white British personnel to determine barriers that disadvantage ethnic minorities personnel.

1.3 Gurkha service personnel may only apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain up to 18 weeks before they leave the UK armed forces. We recommend an earlier application date as the ILR process compounds what is already a challenging time in preparing for civilian life.

2. MoD and the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) to address enduring differences as a result of historic pension inequalities faced by Gurkha veterans retiring before 1997.

This remains an important issue for Gurkha veterans retired before 1997, who receive an Indian Army rate pension supplemented by a welfare uplift and may not qualify for full state pension (44). The issue also applies to Gurkha veterans who served before and after 1997, and who continue to be paid under the Gurkha Pension Scheme of 1948 for their service before 1997.

The UK Government’s position to date is that the Gurkha Pension Scheme (GPS), which was established in accordance with the Tri-Partite Agreement of 1947 and from 2000 augmented by regular welfare uplifts, is fair on the basis that it was appropriate for the circumstances of Gurkha service personnel at the time. Once those circumstances changed (including Gurkha terms and conditions of service), the UK Government reviewed and revised the pension terms.

After 15 years of service, members of the GPS qualified for an immediate pension, commonly aged 33. Until the introduction of preserved pensions in 1975, most British enlisted personnel, by contrast, needed to serve 22 years to reach the immediate pension point under the terms of AFPS 75, leaving the forces with no pension rights before that period. Post-1975, eligible members of the AFPS 75 who left before the 22-year point were entitled to a preserved pension payable at age 60. Therefore, most Gurkhas would typically be receiving pension payments for over 25 years before most of their British counterparts of the

same rank and length of service started to receive their pension. The total capitalised value of the GPS pension is in most cases similar to or greater than that given to their British counterparts, because it is paid over a much longer period of time (16). The Gurkha Pension Scheme is also heritable twice, by a wider range of beneficiaries, rather than once as in the case of the AFPS. Since 2003, the pension issue has been subject to three judicial reviews and in 2016 the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the differences in pension entitlements for Gurkha soldiers compared to other British Army personnel were not discriminatory and were objectively and reasonably justified. Nevertheless, the participants we interviewed, and the perspectives of our community partners, showed that historic pension differences remain a source of distress. For Gurkha veterans who opted to take the GOTT and transferred to the AFPS, disagreements largely relate to the service credits awarded for pre-1997 service.

3. Access to services and clear, understandable and timely information and support pre-, during service and post-service.

Gurkha and Fijian personnel highlighted the complex bureaucracy of immigration processes and how these complicated the military-to-civilian transition. We heard how both groups encounter issues that British personnel do not face, such as insecurities around the immigration status, which subsequently affect their ability to work, financial costs of ILE/R and citizenship for themselves and family members, and linguistic and cultural barriers in understanding information from UK organisations and services. We recommend the following actions:

3.1 Defence to provide timely, accurate and understandable information to ‘non-UK’ personnel on issues of recruitment, training, immigration and military-to-civilian transition so personnel can better understand how their immigration status may

impact opportunities or access to resources in service. We understand that Fijian and Gurkha networks and Tri-Services Families Federations provide much of this information.

3.2 Defence and Third sector to collaborate with already established and successful Fijian and Gurkha networks that have access to communities; have in-depth knowledge of the communities’ needs and some pre-existing infrastructure for implementing support for non-UK personnel and their families. We heard how local networks have organically developed to become the main sources of support for military personnel, veterans and family members in a myriad of ways. These networks support personnel transitioning from the Armed Forces into employment and finding housing. Mentors from these communities could be linked with serving personnel to provide advice in Nepali and Fijian, such as the importance of saving money for families’ ILR applications, making the most of career opportunities in-service in anticipation of entering the civilian job market, and navigating applications on immigration, residency, housing and other supports post-service.

3.3 Third Sector organisations to review their case management on support provided to ‘non-UK’ veterans. Participants noted their awareness of Third Sector support but did not always feel confident accessing services in English. Community supports and networks are playing an essential role in bridging gaps caused by linguistic, cultural and digital barriers so that veterans can access healthcare, benefit entitlements and social services. Third sector organisations can work with, or help relieve the workloads, of these networks, through outreach and considering how to improve cultural and linguistic understanding to better support these cohorts.

3.4 Funding is needed to support community centres and networks who are providing essential support. From our community engagement and empirical research, we saw that local communities are supplementing a lack of financial and social supports for an ageing population of Gurkha veterans with potentially complex needs. As a result, there were concerns about whether these networks could survive, and function given a dearth of funding and resources. In addition, these centres and networks mostly rely upon a voluntary workforce who themselves are often veterans or are military/ veteran family members and have their own specific needs.

4. Focusing upon the needs of ‘non-UK’ families

Participants described the impact of lengthy separation from their families and the stress that family members face when personnel are in service and after the military-to-civilian transition. Family members are also subject to immigration control during their partner’s service; sometimes they experience greater linguistic barriers; lack military camaraderie and other supports and when permitted to join their military partner, they have no choice over location or type of housing.

4.1 The MoD to review how the principles set by the UK Armed Forces Family Strategy (45) are meeting the needs of ‘non-UK’ families through consultation with family members and Tri-Service Families Federations.

4.2 The ILR waiver for Service personnel that meet certain criteria introduced in 2022, to be extended to family members to address the impacts of extended family separation and immigration insecurity.

4.3 Further research to be conducted on the experiences of family members of Commonwealth and Gurkha personnel.

5. Further research is required that focuses upon:

5.1 Experiences of family members of Commonwealth and Gurkha personnel.

As described in recommendation 4, further research is required to gather first-hand perspectives of ‘non-UK’ military spouses/ partners and children.

5.2 Collecting data on experiences of discrimination alongside health data, wellbeing and other social and relationship outcomes. The study did not have access to the relevant data to determine whether symptom patterns across the ethnic groups was linked to discrimination. This project supports the collection of data in this area to better understand the impacts of racism.

5.3 Replicating analyses assessing the links between symptoms and ethnicity using other samples. Our analysis indicates that ethnicity is related to differences in the report of physical/mental health symptoms. Clinical recommendations cannot be developed from our findings as these are based on small sample sizes. We therefore suggest future research explores symptom expression using other samples. That said, clinicians should be cognisant to the challenges that ‘non-UK’ personnel may face, and that this may eventuate in different health needs, disclosure and help-seeking behaviours.

Table 2. Summary of recommendations by the cohorts interviewed within the HEAR study

Gurkhas who served and left before 1997	Gurkhas who served before 1997 and left after 1997	Gurkhas who served after 1997 and Fijian personnel serving after 1998
Context		
<p>Lifelong impact of lower pay, unexpected military discharge and lower pensions affecting quality of life.</p> <p>Moved to the UK in 2009 but often experienced financial problems and difficulties accessing health, social and welfare services.</p>	<p>Served during the transfer of the Gurkha base from Hong Kong to the UK. Experienced some improvements (equal pensions for those serving since 1997). Equal terms and conditions for employment introduced from 2007.</p> <p>However, ongoing examples of discrimination and unequal pensions for years served before 1997.</p>	<p>Improvements made but still experiencing differential access to career opportunities preventing candidacy for promotion.</p> <p>Gurkha personnel specifically unable to apply for ILR until 18 weeks before discharge causing compounding problems at point of transition.</p> <p>Both groups paid high costs for ILR (before waivers introduced in 2022).</p> <p>Issues surrounding family separation and support for families.</p>

Gurkhas who served and left before 1997	Gurkhas who served before 1997 and left after 1997	Gurkhas who served after 1997 and Fijian personnel serving after 1998
Recommendations		
<p>Recommendation 2: MoD and DWP to address enduring differences as a result of historic pension inequalities faced by Gurkha veterans serving before 1997.</p> <p>Recommendation 3. Access to services and clear, understandable and timely information and support post-service. This can involve Third Sector reviewing current reach and services provided to ageing Gurkha veteran population; developing more collaboration with pre-existing Gurkha networks (3.2 and 3.3). Increased funding needed to support these community networks (3.4).</p>		<p>Recommendation 1: A review of how policies targeting unfair treatment and discrimination are implemented on a local level, including 1) the delivery of JSP 763 regarding incidents of discrimination and racism; 2) the implementation of career management policies for ‘non-UK’ v. British personnel comparatively.</p> <p>Recommendation 3: Access to services and clear, understandable and timely information and support in service and post-service, including targeted advice on issues of recruitment, training, immigration and military-to-civilian transition (3.1). Defence and Third Sector to collaborate with Fijian and Gurkha networks (3.2); Third Sector to review its services to non-UK veterans and families (3.3) and increased funding for community networks (3.4)</p> <p>Recommendation 4: Focusing upon the needs of non-UK families, including how this is considered within the UK Armed Forces Family Strategy (2022-2032). This can include a consultation with families and Tri-Service Family Federations; extending the ILR waiver to family members and more research in this population.</p>

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