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# Perceptions of sexual coercion: learning from young people in Ibadan, Nigeria

Ademola J Ajuwon, Iwalola Akin-Jimoh, Benjamin Oladapo Olley, Olagoke Akintola

*This study explored the problem of sexual coercion from the perspectives of 77 young people aged 14–21 in Ibadan, Nigeria, the behaviours they perceive to be sexually coercive and the contexts in which these occur through four narrative workshops. Participants were drawn from two secondary schools and 15 apprentice workshops. All four groups identified similar coercive behaviours and developed narratives of the events that typically lead up to them. Behaviours included rape, unwanted touching, incest, assault, verbal abuse, threats, unwanted kissing; forced exposure to pornographic films, use of drugs for sedation and traditional charms for seduction, and insistence on abortion if unwanted pregnancy occurs. Men were typically the perpetrators and young women the victims. Perpetrators included acquaintances, boyfriends, neighbours, parents and relatives. All the narratives revealed the inability of young people to communicate effectively with each other and resolve differences. The results suggest the need for life-skills training that facilitates communication, seeks to redress gender power imbalances, teaches alternatives to coercion as a means of resolving conflict over sexual relations and respect for sexual and reproductive rights, and provides victims with information on appropriate services, support and referral.*

**Keywords:** young people, sexual coercion and abuse, gender issues, research methodology, Nigeria

**S**EXUAL coercion is the act of forcing or attempting to force another individual through violence, threats, verbal insistence, deceit, cultural expectations or economic circumstances to engage in any sexual activity against his or her will. Sexual coercion exists along a continuum, which includes unwanted or unasked-for touching, insistence, verbal intimidation, harassment, forced marriage, assault, attempted rape and rape.<sup>1</sup> Girls and women at all stages of their lives are most often the victims of sexual coercion and men the perpetrators.<sup>1–4</sup> However, adolescent girls and young women are disproportionately affected, due to their relative inexperience, limited negotiation skills, dependent financial position and traditional gender norms.<sup>5</sup>

Sexual coercion is rarely discussed or studied in Nigeria. Yet a study among young women apprentices in Ikorodu, Southwestern Nigeria found that the first sexual encounter for 20 per

cent of sexually active young women had involved coercion.<sup>6</sup> Other studies in Ibadan, e.g. among women apprentices<sup>7</sup> and women hawkers in bus and truck stations<sup>8</sup> found that 4 per cent in the former and 15 per cent in the latter reported having been raped. In the latter, it was said that men in these settings consider women hawkers 'fair game' sexually. A review of six years' records of the Nigeria Police in the Southeastern city of Calabar, however, found that only 19 cases of rape of girl children and adolescents had been reported,<sup>9</sup> indicating how rarely such cases come to justice.

In several of the knowledge, attitudes and practice (KAP) surveys on reproductive health and HIV/AIDS among young people, investigators have tagged on questions relating to coercion.<sup>6–8</sup> These have provided data on reported prevalence of sexual coercion, but data on the contexts and the circumstances in which these behaviours occur, as perceived by

young people themselves, are almost entirely missing. Furthermore, most studies have tended to focus only on rape, even though sexual coercion involves a range of behaviours.

This paper reports on findings from research carried out in Ibadan Northwest Local Government Area (INLGA) in Southwestern Nigeria, which explored the context of sexual coercion as perceived by young men and women and the circumstances and sequence of behaviours and motives that they associated with coercion. With a population of 146,759, this LGA is one of five administrative units in the metropolis of Ibadan. The Yoruba are the dominant ethnic group in the area.

Public discussion of sexually related issues is not common in this area. Direct mention of sexual intercourse is generally taboo and euphemisms are used instead, e.g. *won b'ara won sun* (they slept with each other), *won ni ajose poo* (they had something together). More recently, young people have begun to use the English word 'fun' to describe sexual activity. Traditional mores of the Yoruba discourage pre-marital sexual activity among young people, especially young women. However in recent years, there have been marked changes in premarital sexual activity among young people, especially in urban areas.<sup>6-8,10-12</sup>

Gender-based double standards are common among the Yoruba, and multiple sexual partners are tolerated for men. At the same time, gender norms tolerate sexual coercion of women. Thus, it is considered acceptable for a man to force a woman on whom he has spent a lot of money to have intercourse, or who wears clothes that he perceived to be suggestive or sexy.<sup>13</sup>

### The narrative research method

The narrative research method was developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to gain a better understanding of how young people think and act. Unlike other methods of data collection, which tend to focus on single events, the narrative approach explores the continuum and context of behaviour, using a participatory approach in exploring sensitive issues such as sexual coercion. Through role-plays and the development of story lines, the method allows young people to create charac-

ters based on real life and describe sequences of events and plausible and implausible courses of action. It also enables participants to draw inferences concerning the intentions and motives underlying the conduct of the characters and comment on the contexts in which behaviours take place. As in other qualitative methods, the approach emphasises general observation rather than personal revelation; at the same time, participants are asked to develop stories based on what is rather than what should be.<sup>14-16</sup>

### Study participants

Young people constitute approximately a third of the population of the INLGA. About one-third of young people of secondary school age are attending schools in the area.<sup>17</sup> The majority of the rest are involved in apprenticeships or hawking. Generally, apprenticeships are conducted in small shops under instructors who operate in the informal sector; they lack government recognition, registration or support. Hawkers, also part of the informal sector, usually sell snacks and beverages on major streets and in bus and truck stations.<sup>18</sup>

Workshop participants were selected from local schools and shops with apprentices. Hawkers were excluded because of their frequent mobility. The students came from two of the seven state secondary schools in the area, selected randomly, which were fairly representative. Enumeration of shops employing apprentices revealed that apprentices were concentrated in five vocations – auto mechanics, dressmaking, hairdressing, shoe repair and, in particular, patent medicine sales. The apprentices came from 15 of the approximately 100 establishments and were also randomly selected.

The study team obtained permission from the school administrators, the local associations of instructors and each instructor. School and shop authorities were asked to nominate young people, based on age and sex, ability to speak Yoruba or English fluently, and interest and consent. Thus, 40 students and 40 apprentices aged 14-21 were selected and invited by the study team to attend the workshops, of whom 77 actually attended (Table 1). Patent medicine sellers were in the majority among the apprentices and the female apprentices were slightly older than the others.

**Table 1. Profile of workshop participants**

	No. of apprentices		No. of students	
	Male (n=19)	Female (n=18)	Male (n=20)	Female (n=20)
<b>Apprentices</b>				
Patent medicine sellers	8	9		
Mechanics	7	0		
Tailors	3	5		
Shoemakers	1	0		
Hairdressers	0	4		
<b>Students</b>				
Senior secondary one			7	10
Senior secondary two			13	10
<b>Mean age (years)</b>	18	20	17	17.5

### The workshops

Four narrative workshops were held in a hotel conference hall: one each for male and female students and male and female apprentices, following the WHO guidelines. Separating young women and young men helped to ensure relatively uninhibited participation, particularly for those who would not have felt comfortable discussing sex-related issues in the presence of the opposite sex. About 20 participants attended each of the four workshops, which lasted 20 hours over four days.

Researchers opened each workshop in plenary, provided a brief overview of youth sexuality in Nigeria, pointed out that gaps exist in our understanding of sexual coercion in young people's lives and explained the goals of the workshop. Participants were familiarised with the methodology of the narrative workshop, and assured that they were not obliged to disclose their own experiences or the identity of others whose experiences they might describe.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject and the advantage of small groups, each workshop group was divided into three small groups, each with a facilitator. Each group selected a rapporteur whose responsibilities were to synthesise the discussion and present group activities at plenary sessions. There were two main activities in the small groups: free-listing and defining of behaviours perceived to be coercive and role-playing of typical scenarios. Partici-

pants could include behaviours that they or other young people they knew may have experienced.

Following the free-listing exercise, each rapporteur presented the list from their small group, and facilitators transferred these lists onto a flip-chart. The large group was asked to suggest possible factors underlying these behaviours, and describe the typical perpetrator and victim. Participants could then ask questions or seek clarification emerging from these.

Of the six behaviours mentioned most often by at least two groups, the study team assigned two behaviours to each group and asked them to develop stories that best depicted the behaviour, including a 'typical' sequence of events preceding it. The groups created characters for their stories and presented them at the third plenary session. During the ensuing discussions, alternative narratives were offered and discussed until a consensus was reached concerning the most typical (or alternative) representations of a particular type of incident. Thereafter, each small group selected its own cast, costumes and props, and rehearsed a role-play of one of the coercive incidents developed at the final plenary session. The role-plays and discussions of them were videotaped and transcribed.

### Perception of sexually coercive behaviours

In the course of the free-listing exercise, workshop participants reached a consensus that 11 behaviours were coercive (Table 2). Sexual coercion itself was termed *iwa ipanle to romo ibalopo*, or anti-social sexual behaviour. All groups ranked rape and unwanted touch as the most common coercive behaviours. Only incest was considered a taboo (*eewo*). The behaviours fell into three groups:

- those that referred to threatened and forced sex (*amudo*), such as rape or forced intercourse (*ifipabani-lopo*), unwanted touch described as unfriendly play (*erekere* and *ere egele*) or unwanted touching of the backside (*gbadi-gbadi*), incest, assault, verbal abuse (described by male students as 'messing' or causing embarrassment), and unwanted kisses;
- those that focused on deception (*ectan*) and were perceived as setting the stage for non-

**Table 2. Free listing of coercive behaviours**

Young men		Young women	
Students	Apprentices	Students	Apprentices
Gang rape	Rape	Rape	Gang rape
Unwanted touch	Unwanted touch	Unwanted touch	Unwanted touch
Being forced to watch pornographic films	Deceit	Being forced to watch pornographic films	Request for abortion
Use of traditional charms	Incest	Unwanted kiss	Incest
Mockery (verbal abuse)	Beating up a girl/use of drugs to sedate	Mockery (verbal abuse)	Mockery (verbal abuse)

consensual sex, such as forced exposure to pornographic films, use of traditional charms (for example, a medicinal ring or incantations made by a traditional healer), or use of drugs for sedation and/or seduction, and

- those that refused the partner any choice in determining the outcome of sex, e.g. insistence that she have an abortion.

### Perceptions of perpetrators and victims of sexual coercion

Participants were unanimous in saying that perpetrators of sexual coercion were not strangers to their victims. They identified male relatives as the leading perpetrators of coercion, and specifically fathers in relation to incest. Perpetrators of other forms of sexual coercion were described as somewhat older than their victims, including acquaintances, boyfriends, fellow students, relatives and neighbours.

Excepting incest, sexual coercion tended to be planned and sometimes carried out as a group activity. Perpetrators seldom acted alone but rather were described as receiving ideas, encouragement and support from friends in plotting and committing coercive acts. Whether rape, beating, forced exposure to pornographic films or use of drugs to sedate a girl, peers were said to play a role. For example, friends would collaborate in beating up a girl, help to identify and obtain a pornographic film, recommend a sedative drug or hold a girl down so that the perpetrator could rape her. Finally, friends could participate themselves, e.g. taking turns to rape the girlfriend of one of them.

It was said that coercive behaviours might occur in any setting, ranging from inside school

premises to public places such as roads. However, the most commonly identified sites were the home of the perpetrator and social events or parties. Both sexes considered the home when others were out to be particularly 'safe' for forced sex because it offered the victim little or no access to help.

### Narratives and role-plays: insights

In the narratives and role-plays, with remarkable similarity across the four workshops, participants provided insights into the events they felt led to coercive behaviours. Rarely was coercion depicted as an isolated event. Rather, it usually happened as a series of behaviours, for example, a sequence which began with deceit, use of drugs for sedation and traditional charms for seduction, and then moved to verbal insistence and threats, to unwanted touch and ultimately to forced sex. One often-repeated scenario described was of a perpetrator resorting to coercion when he failed to persuade a young woman to be his girlfriend or when she refused to accede to his request for sex. In the two examples of narratives of rape below, it is noteworthy that the young women's narrative does not pay any attention to setting the stage for or justifying forced sex, as the young men's does.

*Lucky and Sade live in the same neighbourhood and have many opportunities to interact. Both are at home, waiting for the results of their final high school examination; other household members have gone to work or school. Lucky takes advantage of this opportunity and persuades Sade to be his girlfriend. After they have been friends for a while, Lucky wishes to have sex with Sade but does not know how to bring up the*

issue directly. He thinks the best way is to lure her to visit him in his room. One day, he visits Sade in her house and borrows a magazine from her. Sade is initially reluctant to lend him the magazine because it does not belong to her, but acquiesces when Lucky promises to return it the next day. He deliberately decides not to return the magazine for a week, hoping that Sade will come to his house to collect it, so that he can put his plan into action. Sade does go to Lucky's home for the magazine, and despite her reluctance, Lucky convinces her to stay and entertains her with snacks and drinks. He lures Sade into his room and locks the door, placing the key in his pocket to make it difficult for her to 'escape'. He thinks 'Well, this is a good opportunity to have "fun" with Sade', since the entire household is out at work or school, but does not know how to communicate his intention to her, fearing her reaction. He resolves his dilemma by concluding that 'actions speak louder than words' and tries to set the stage by playing a pornographic video film, and touching Sade on the shoulder, chest and breast to put her 'in the mood'. Sade displays her reluctance by removing his hands from her body and expresses her intention to leave, but finds the door bolted. Lucky determines to force sex on Sade, justifying his intention with such thoughts as, 'Well, if she does not want to do it voluntarily then I better force her, after all, many girls say "no" when they really mean "yes" and 'Only weak boys will accept no for an answer' and finally, 'At worst I will lose her as a girlfriend, but I will already have achieved my plans, so no problem'. Sade on the other hand feels trapped - she thinks of screaming for help but does not do so for fear that people will blame her, saying that 'If she were not interested in sex, why did she visit him in his room in the first place?' In this circumstance, Lucky overpowers and rapes her. (Male apprentices)

Bayo and Joke are students at the university, who have been going steady for some time. Bayo takes 'good care' of Joke (buys her snacks, drinks, cards, etc), and she appreciates this. Bayo introduces the idea of having sex with Joke but she rejects this, explaining that she wants to complete her education before becoming sexually involved. She resists Bayo's continued pleading, even when Bayo visits her in her room on campus and tries to persuade

her. Bayo is angry that he has not got his expected returns on the money he has spent on her. He resolves to deal with Joke in his own way and seeks the assistance of his friends. Together they determine a plan to 'teach that arrogant girl a lesson'. As part of the plan, Bayo and his friends monitor Joke's movements on campus and determine the most appropriate time to 'get her'. As she is returning to her room from class one night, Bayo and his friends ambush and overpower her. Bayo rapes her and the others take turns to do the same. Bayo informs her that he would not have raped her if she had complied with his request for sex, and threatens that the group will deal even more severely with her if she reports the incident. (Female students)

Several scenarios were described as ways of concluding the following story line: Moscow and Bola live in the same neighbourhood. Moscow wants Bola to be his girlfriend but she tells him she is not interested in a relationship with him. Moscow tries all the tricks he knows to convince the girl, but thus far he has failed. Feeling rejected, he seeks advice from his male friends, including Sege.

Sege and Moscow 'set bait' to get her. Sege organizes a party and invites Bola to attend. Unknown to her, Moscow and Sege are friends and have organized the party mainly to lure her. Prior to the day of the party Moscow and Sege contact a patent medicine seller to recommend a drug that is best for making someone sleep deeply. They do not disclose what the drug is meant for so the patent medicine seller sells it to them. As the party gets underway, drinks are served and Moscow drops the drugs into Bola's drinks. When she appears to be feeling drowsy, Sege suggests that she go into a private room to rest. While she is under the influence of the drug, Moscow and then his friends rape her. Sege colludes with Moscow, and denies any prior information about the incident. Moscow no longer 'pursues' Bola since he has already achieved his aim. (Male apprentices)

Sege takes him to a traditional healer, relates his dilemma to the healer and receives the latter's assurance of assistance. The healer provides Moscow with a charm and instructions on its

use. Moscow pays the healer, and later during the week, puts the charm to the test. He recites an incantation, calls Bola's name and commands her to obey him. He engineers to wait for Bola on the street she usually takes to school, and instructs her to visit him at home later in the day. Under the influence of the charm, Bola visits and has sex with him. Moscow will maintain the relationship until the influence of the charm wears off. (Male students)

After monitoring Bola's movements for some time, Moscow and his friends decide the most appropriate time and place to ridicule her. His main aim in doing so is to 'belittle what he could not get'. He and his friends choose a public place such as a street along a major road to commit the act. Moscow and his friends yell abuses at her, belittle her and jokingly touch her breasts and backside to embarrass her...

At this point in the narrative, male and female participants differ in their narration of the consequences of mockery on the victim. Male students suggested that Moscow and his friends inform Bola that the ridicule meted out to her is to punish her for her arrogance, and conclude that Moscow, after 'losing out' will no longer pursue her. By contrast, female students suggest that Moscow apologises to Bola afterwards, in the hopes that she will accede to his request.

The following are typical of the narratives about incest and the pressure on young women to have an abortion:

*Sule and Fatima have been married for some years now. Fatima is a trader who travels frequently to buy crops from farmers in rural communities and bring these to urban areas for sale. Fatima and Sule have one daughter (Risi), a teenager attending a local secondary school. Fatima is not always available to attend to the needs of Sule. It is Risi who takes care of the home whenever Fatima is away from home. One day while Fatima is away, Sule looks at Risi amorously as she serves him his dinner, and that night he tiptoes into Risi's room, lies beside her and touches her body. Risi wakes up, realises what is going on and tries unsuccessfully to resist. Sule rapes his daughter and then threatens to stop paying her school fees if she discloses the incident to anyone. He justifies his action thus: 'It is better to have sex with her*

*than going to a prostitute who can give me a sexually transmitted disease'* (Male apprentices)

*Obas and Kate have been boyfriend/girlfriend for sometime now. When Obas first proposes that they 'get to know each other better' (have sex), Kate objects, saying that she wants to complete her training as an apprentice first. After some persuasion, however, she agrees. Kate tries to avoid pregnancy by using a concoction of potash, salt and water, which a friend recommends to her. Kate soon discovers that she is pregnant and considers having the baby. When she informs Obas about her condition, his first reaction is to deny responsibility, accusing her of seeing other boys. When she finally convinces him it is his, he accepts responsibility but insists that the pregnancy be aborted because he is not ready for marriage or fatherhood. He insists that Kate has an abortion and does not allow her to express her views. Kate's friend also advises her to terminate the pregnancy to avoid the shame of 'bringing forth a bastard'.* (Female apprentices)

Participants' debates on several story lines during the plenary and group activities commonly showed their acceptance of traditional gender norms. Young men tended to argue that some narratives should have depicted girls as being responsible for the sexually coercive behaviours that they experienced. Both male students and male apprentices cited girls' rudeness in turning down requests for sex or friendship as an invitation to forced intercourse. On the other hand, while the majority of female apprentices disagreed, a small number did argue that 'a girl should be available for sex once she agrees to be a girlfriend'. Finally, while male students did not dispute the need to use charms for *amudo* (forcing sex), there was some disagreement among them about the types of charms commonly used, for example, a medicinal ring, incantations or a medicinal waistband. They did agree that while boys were more likely to use a ring, older men would use incantation. They also believed that these charms were effective.

## Discussion

This study has yielded substantial insight into the perceptions of young people with regard to sexual coercion and the contexts in which co-

ercion is perceived to occur. Sexual coercion of young women is usually described as a carefully planned act, perpetrated by someone well-known and in a familiar setting. Gender norms and stereotypes operated strongly in sexual coercion scenarios. Young men, for example, were much more likely than young women to identify strategies used to lure or force young women into sex, usually through deceit. Young women were described as passive and trusting, displaying the submissive role that Yoruba women are traditionally expected to play in sexual relationships.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most importantly, all the narratives revealed the inability of young people to communicate effectively with each other, or to talk over and resolve differences over having sex.

Despite the sensitive nature of sexual coercion, the non-intrusive nature of the narrative research workshop created a non-threatening and conducive environment for young people to convey their perceptions of sexual coercion openly. The role-plays enabled them

to describe coercive events without needing to refer to personal experience or feel fear of disclosure. Responses were fairly spontaneous and stimulated lively discussion. In the next phase of our study, a survey and in-depth interviews will be carried out with a larger number of young people, using concepts and information that emerged in the course of the narrative workshops. The findings from the narrative workshops will be useful in triangulating and interpreting survey data, and at the same time, provide qualitative insights to assist in policy and programme development.

There are of course limitations to these findings. The perceptions may not be generalisable to all young people in Ibadan, or Nigeria as a whole. Moreover, the focus on developing 'typical' scenarios may well have resulted in narratives describing somewhat more acceptable behaviours and hiding others that are perceived as even more unacceptable or deviant. Insights reported in this paper need to be supplemented by more in-depth assessments, particularly with



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regard to actual personal experiences and the factors that place young people at high risk or protect them from sexual coercion.

One unanticipated but important outcome of the workshops was that participants became sensitised to the unacceptability of all forms of sexual coercion. Many young women stated that the workshop had changed their belief that victims had somehow provoked and deserved what had happened to them, and they felt more empowered to try to prevent coercion and deal with perpetrators in future. Male participants said they had resolved not to perpetrate sexually coercive acts. This is a valuable outcome even though workshops like these are not sufficient in themselves to achieve these ends.

The results of this study suggest the need for life-skills training for both young men and women that facilitates communication, seeks to redress gender power imbalances and double standards, teaches alternatives to coercion as a means of resolving anger and conflict over sexual relations and respect for sexual and reproductive rights, and provides victims of

sexual coercion with information on appropriate services, support and referral. Finally, interventions are needed that will educate and sensitise the community to confront gender and cultural norms that encourage, or at best do not seek to prevent or reject, acts of sexual coercion.

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## Résumé

Cette étude a exploré le problème de la coercition sexuelle dans la perspective de 77 garçons et filles de 14 à 21 ans d'Ibadan, Nigéria, les comportements à leur avis coercitifs et les contextes où ils se produisent. À cet effet, les jeunes, venant de deux écoles secondaires et de 15 ateliers d'apprentissage, ont participé à quatre ateliers de narration. Ces quatre groupes ont identifié des comportements coercitifs très similaires et ont conté les événements qui y conduisent habituellement. Les comportements comprenaient le viol, les caresses imposées, l'inceste, les coups, les violences verbales, les menaces, les baisers forcés, la vision obligée de films pornographiques, l'emploi de sédatifs, et l'insistance en faveur de l'avortement en cas de grossesse non désirée. Les hommes étaient toujours les coupables et les femmes les victimes. Les coupables étaient des connaissances, des fiancés, des voisins, et des parents. Toutes les narrations révélaient l'incapacité des jeunes de communiquer entre eux à fin de résoudre leur différends. Les résultats montrent qu'une formation aux compétences essentielles est nécessaire et faciliterait la communication, redresserait les déséquilibres de pouvoir entre les sexes, enseignerait d'autres méthodes que la coercition pour résoudre les conflits sur les relations sexuelles, du respect aux droits sexuels et reproductifs, et fournirait aux victimes une information sur les services de soutien et de consultation.

## Resumen

En esta investigación se exploró el problema de la coacción sexual desde la perspectiva de 77 jóvenes de 14 a 21 años, en Ibadan, Nigeria, a través de cuatro talleres narrativos en los cuales se indagó acerca de los comportamientos que los jóvenes perciben como coactivos y los contextos en los cuales dichos comportamientos se manifiestan. Los participantes fueron reclutados de dos escuelas secundarias y 15 talleres vocacionales. Los cuatro grupos identificaron comportamientos coactivos similares y construyeron narrativas de los acontecimientos que típicamente los preceden. Los comportamientos incluyeron la violación, caricias no deseadas, el incesto, la agresión, el abuso verbal, amenazas, besos no deseados, exposición a películas pornográficas forzada, el uso de drogas sedantes y hechizos tradicionales para la seducción, y la insistencia en el aborto en casos de embarazo no deseado. Los autores de cualquier forma de coacción eran típicamente hombres – conocidos, novios, vecinos, padres y otros parientes – y sus víctimas mujeres jóvenes. Todas las narrativas revelaron la incapacidad de los jóvenes de comunicarse efectivamente entre sí y resolver conflictos. Los resultados apuntan a la necesidad de cursos de educación para la vida dirigidos a facilitar la comunicación; reparar los desequilibrios de poder en las relaciones de género; enseñar alternativas a la coacción como una manera de resolver conflictos en las relaciones sexuales, y respeto para los derechos sexuales y reproductivos; y proveer a las víctimas apoyo, información y acceso a servicios apropiados.