**Climate activism**

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In a late-2022 survey of almost 500 climate scientists worldwide, the climate justice organization Global Witness found that almost 40 per cent had been targeted with online harassment or abuse in response to their work, and 8 per cent had received death threats. One of them reported, “The death (and rape) threats were extended to my children.”

Climate researchers are frequently quoted in the press these days, given the onrush of unprecedented climatic events, and that brings even more targeting. Among those who told Global Witness that they were appearing at least once a month in the media, almost three-fourths had experienced online attacks. The report added that “... this abuse is having serious detrimental impacts. Half (48 per cent) of the 183 who had received abuse said it had made them less productive at work, 41 per cent said they are less likely to post on social media about the climate, and over a fifth (21 per cent) said it had made them dread work. Meanwhile one in five (21 per cent) of those impacted by online hate said the attacks had made them fear for their personal safety.

Researchers reported explicitly racist attacks, and, of the women polled, 13 per cent said they had been threatened with sexual violence. Helene Muri, a Norwegian climate scientist and co-author on IPCC reports, told Global Witness that in the worst attacks, “they say that they are going to hunt me down and do various things to me. And what I appreciate even less than that is when they are calling my father up and saying various things to him.”

The Science Media Center has published a guide titled, “Advice for Researchers Experiencing Harassment.” It urges scientists to continue speaking publicly despite being hounded online, because “if you stop engaging with the media you may struggle to reach out to the wider public, thereby creating a vacuum of information that those critical of your research can exploit.” The guide does, however, acknowledge the danger that researchers face. And on the question of whether they should engage directly with online attackers, the guide is emphatic: “The answer is almost always no. The advice from experts in this area, including the police, is to avoid engagement with these extreme critics.”

Far from being cowed by online threats, increasing numbers of researchers are publicly supporting on-the-ground climate activism. In 2021, more than 400 climate scientists signed an open letter condemning the increased criminalization of nonviolent climate protest by governments around the world. One prominent signer of the letter, Julia Steinberger at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, who works in ecology and ecological economics, told ‘The Guardian’, “As scientists, we have a duty to stand with the activists who are paying attention to the science, rather than these governments, who seem to be more swayed by powerful economic interests than by the life chances of their own citizens.”

Many scientists have concluded that they must go further, not only supporting protesters but also becoming climate activists themselves. Among hundreds of researchers who have helped write the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s massive, increasingly alarming reports, one in four reported having taken part in grassroots climate protests.

But, noting that such action has so far had minimal effect, six scientists, including Steinberger, authored a paper last year in which they called on their colleagues around the world to up the ante with “carefully targeted and peaceful civil disobedience,” in which “scientists accept the risk of arrest for conscientious but potentially unlawful acts.”

Excerpted: ‘Scientists Pursue Climate Activism Despite Violent Threats’. Courtesy: Commondreams.org