Ladders4Action is a nonprofit organisation which works to radically enhance the equality and inclusivity of the UK’s research spaces. It seeks to protect and nurture marginalised voices who might otherwise feel excluded from these spaces, fostering a community of researchers from a diverse array of backgrounds. The organisation recognises that only by translating theory into meaningful action will we create a lasting impact, opening the door to a research landscape which has remained exclusionary for far too long. Research Outreach was privileged to interview Dr Addy Adelaine, the founder of Ladders4Action, about her work.

Could you give us a brief introduction to your research and your broader social work?

I actually started off in STEM. I was an engineer working in disaster and humanitarian contexts, predominately internationally in Africa and East Asia. I studied engineering, and worked in that area for a couple of years doing project management for disasters and community-based disaster-management initiatives. With my own identity as a mixed-heritage, working-class woman in engineering, I very quickly became aware of how certain voices were marginalised. I don’t come from the majority world, so I was very aware of the inequality in the sector and the voicelessness of certain individuals.

I became kind of obsessed with the idea of accountability. My PhD is on the subject of inclusive accountability: how you measure it, how you ensure it, and decide what is responsible action, how you measure success. My PhD is on the subject of inclusive accountability during the pandemic. I did a lot of work looking at inclusive leadership and diversity in the NHS. I just finished that series of work when COVID-19 happened; I felt the impact on my own community. The people dying and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the Black community. I started to look into this. You can go to YouTube to see some of the stories that people put out there. You can go to YouTube to see some of the stats here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfMlClF274U&t=9s.

When I realised that nobody got research funding allocation in the UK, I really felt passionate about wanting to use my knowledge and expertise in understanding disasters, how pandemics work, about inclusive leadership and accountability, during the pandemic.

Partly because of my own ethical dilemma of doing international aid work while I lived in the UK. I actually started off in STEM. I was an engineer working in disaster and humanitarian contexts, predominately internationally in Africa and East Asia. I studied engineering, and worked in that area for a couple of years doing project management for disasters and community-based disaster-management initiatives. With my own identity as a mixed-heritage, working-class woman in engineering, I very quickly became aware of how certain voices were marginalised. I don’t come from the majority world, so I was very aware of the inequality in the sector and the voicelessness of certain individuals.

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With several other highly skilled researchers and academics I know, I applied for the NIHR UKRI funding to look at the disproportional impact of COVID. I didn’t get a positive response; I didn’t get any feedback beyond saying ‘you weren’t successful’. But what I started to realise was that nobody knew got a positive response either. None of these experts in their fields, or people I knew working in this area, were given any funding to explore the disproportionate impact, which I found really concerning. I felt it was really important that the issues affecting my community were addressed and those leading experts had a role in that work. I started to look into this, and what I realised was that even with NIHR funding of £4.3 million, not a single Black academic lead was given any funding.

We also recognised that one of the people who sat on the assessment panel was co-investigator for three of the six successful awards, that all of them had worked together previously, and that most of the research that was funded was looking at genetic-related issues. When I realised that nobody got research funding from the Black community, I started to look into this. You can go to YouTube to see some of the stories that people put out there. You can go to YouTube to see some of the stats here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfMlClF274U&t=9s.

Black academics have a much lower success rate on applications; we’re far less likely to get successful research funding. And that obviously impacts our ability to progress as academics and to reach professor status in the UK. So, for over 25,000 professors in the UK, we have only 37 Black women in the position. We quite often put America up as the beacon of racial inequality, but when you look at higher education and research, what’s happening in the UK is dramatic.

I think that really highlights complex issues on identity stereotyping, how the funding systems and processes work. I worked with nine other Black women – Dr Chisomoi Kalenga, Dr Furaha Asani, Dr Ruth Ngoziia Agbakoba, Natasha Smith, Dr Olumide Adisa, Janine Francois, Dr Michelle King-Okooye, Paulette Williams and Dr Ruby Zelzento – to write an open letter to UKRI about these issues. There was quite a lot of social media traction about this, but it took UKRI over a year to respond to our open letter even though the standard length of response is approximately 48 days. I had to register a complaint, which was partially upheld, and I also put in various Freedom of Information Act requests to get more detailed data in relation to this.

Could you introduce our readers to the origins of Ladders4Action?

I established Ladders4Action in my final year of my PhD. Following my PhD, I tended to work part-time on casual and zero-hour contracts with various universities – as do most Black and BAME academics, who are disproportionately represented on temporary and part-time contracts. So, I started up Ladders4Action as a way of facilitating consultancy work and attaining contracts for universities that I couldn’t secure as an independent researcher. But it was also a way of maintaining my sanity and self-care, and actually being able to do the research that I wanted to do in the manner that I wished to do it.

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Ladders4Action is all about connecting knowledge and action; it is all about that practice-theory gap. We help organisations and individuals to do this in a number of ways: by sharing knowledge, by inviting people into the research process, by delivering training courses, and by delivering action research, and creating collaborative participatory knowledge.

What are some of the courses and workshops currently being run by Ladders4Action?

Previously, we’ve run a number of courses on allyship and anti-racism. We haven’t released this year’s courses yet, but we’re hoping to repeat some of those that we’ve done previously. I want to look at race and complexity, mixed-heritage identity, and intersectional considerations of race. I want to do more work on inclusive accountability, what is meant by that, and how we hold organisations like UKRI to account.
The training is one part of it, but we’re also going to be doing a radical methodology course (the name has yet to be decided). With expert academics, we’re looking at how the research process can be ethical, inclusive, collaborative, decolonised, and can really push the boundaries of methodology.

We’re also hoping to do a retreat for Black scholars or individuals of African heritage. The past couple of years has been particularly traumatic for Black academics or scholars working outside of academia. So, the retreat is really about bringing together individuals, who are quite often very, very isolated in the UK and their institutions. Higher education is a particularly hostile environment to work in when you’re an extremely marginalised individual. But also, to have a bit of joy and celebration about who you are, and our identity, creating networks and social circles and connectivities. The way it’s done in research in higher education involves a lot of networking, and our problem-solving ability is phenomenal.

What can our readers do to support the work of the organisation? There are lots of ways that you can donate and support the organisation. We do commissioned research training workshops. By working with us and paying for us, you are supporting pro bono activities. You can make a small donation for a cup of coffee, or a larger donation on our website. You can also make a direct debit if you wish to make an ongoing payment to our nonprofit organisation.

I think one of the most important things is always to ensure that you maintain fair and ethical tendering processes. So, quite often in research, things don’t go out for tender and it tends to be who you know – all about inner circles and connectivities. The way it’s done in research in higher education is really harmful and discriminatory for individuals who aren’t part of, and don’t have, those social networks.

I’ve mentioned briefly before the importance of citation and referencing our work. So it’s really important that you do your research, make sure that you cite and reference the knowledge of marginalised scholars, but also that you check your approach and make sure that you’re considering marginalised scholars. Look at your reference lists: if they only contain white men from America, that’s a problem.

Make sure that you look outside of who you normally go to, and you challenge yourself and what you do. Just citing and referencing Ladders4Action really helps me; referencing my name helps increase diversity in STEM are trying to help, but they are ignoring the ongoing activism of marginalised scholars who are experts in this field, the thousands of journal articles, books, and documents on how to do this and how to do it well.

I feel there is a growing movement of individuals who are working together to create change.