

# Career constructions and a feminist standpoint on the meaning of context

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## Abstract

This paper explores how context shapes the career constructions of 40 Lebanese female professionals. Starting with career construction theory (CCT), we leverage feminist standpoint theory (FST) to propose a hybrid analytic framework. With this framework, we invite CCT researchers to theorize career constructions as situated. The situatedness of career constructions calls for the exploration of an individual's career choices, coupled with the simultaneous potential constraints on choice emanating from collective experiences of historical and sociopolitical oppression. Theorizing contextual complexities in this way leads to a more nuanced tracing of how the personal experiences of challenge, and for some, the oppressive aspects of collective histories are selectively used to construct a cohesive sense of career storied self, each with distinctive implications for the domains of CCT—Vocational Personality (the what), Career Adaptability (the how), and Life Theme (the why). Our analysis reveals three key patterns: (1) advancing the professional field (vocational expert), (2) seeking self-vindication (adaptive rebel), and (3) engaging in activism (sympathetic activist vs. epistemically privileged activist). We conclude by discussing the value of our framework, thereby highlighting how acknowledging situatedness helps to inform our understandings of career patterns and of the “politicization” of career trajectories.

## KEYWORDS

career construction theory, careers, context, feminist standpoint, Middle East, oppression, qualitative analysis, situatedness

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Each year, Forbes Middle East (2017, 2020) releases rankings that identifies top Arab women in business, government, and social media. In the past four years (2017–2020) Saudi Arabia, for example, was noted to include appointments of women leaders in banks and as the chair of the stock market. Top government appointments were also highlighted in, for example, Egypt (Central Bank); Morocco (Capital Markets), and the UAE (Sharjah's Investment and Development Authority). When asked, many of these women shared career stories, describing the journey to their success. These narratives often tie together varied and personal perceptions of career decisions and actions into a more or less coherent whole.

When one digs deeper, and looks across the region, we see these and other similar stories of success tied to backgrounds of privilege (i.e., socioeconomic status, connections, and family ties). Not to detract from the hard work of these accomplished women, but it is imperative that if one wants to understand the region, we need to recognize that the privileged context of these Forbes-listed individuals are not reflective of the millions of other Arab women across the region who come from underprivileged and/or marginalized communities. In fact, regional statistics show the Arab MENA as one of the worst regions in terms of women's economic empowerment, with the lowest labor force participation rate globally (World Economic Forum, 2020). Women only make up 23.37%, 23.48%, 24.53%, and 12.35% of the workforce in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Sudan, and Iraq, respectively. Although these numbers are similarly dismal, the reasons for such low numbers are likely to vary substantively by country (World Economic Forum, 2018).

Indeed, the region is complex and heterogeneous when it comes to a number of economic, demographic, and geopolitical factors affecting women's career trajectories. For example, despite the fact that both KSA and Lebanon do very badly on closing the gender gap and score in the bottom 10 nations globally (World Economic Forum, 2020), the contextual forces shaping female paid work are distinctive. Saudi Arabia is a resource rich, wealthy country with relative stable political climate, mass influx of foreign workforce, and a Sunni Islamic monarchy (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015; Al-Ahmadi, 2011). Lebanon, on the other hand, is resource poor, has had recent and continuing turbulent sociopolitical turmoil, mass emigration of skilled and knowledge workers, and is a multi-confessional democracy (Afiouni & Karam, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2015; IMF, 2017). Lebanon is also notable for scoring as one of the worst in the region in terms of career trajectories of women, where in 2018 men are 90% more likely to secure managerial opportunities, and this gender gap appears to be increasing over time (World Economic Forum, 2018, 2020). A postconflict environment plagued by a slowing economy, host of millions of refugees, severe and repeated stalling of government, the 2020 devastating Beirut Explosion, and the surrounding instability of war on its southern and northern borders with the Syrian and the Israeli–Palestinian conflicts. This harsh context leads to high unemployment, and stunted career paths particularly among Lebanese women (Afiouni, Karam, & Makarem, 2019).

The harshness of these contextual factors is further exacerbated for women in both countries, due to the patriarchal, feudal, and clientelistic forces further restricting career opportunities (Geha, 2019; Karam & Jamali, 2013). Our current interest is to explore the career stories of a group of 40 successful female professionals in the context of Lebanon specifically. We base our analysis on a set of career story narratives provided by these women through qualitative interviews. The women in our study differ from those described in the opening paragraph, such that our sample are individuals who began from humble (i.e., low-to-medium socioeconomic origins) and are not directly related to powerful families in the country. As will be further fleshed out below, our aim in the current study is to unpack these women's career stories and to explore how the complexities of context shape their career constructions.

As a theoretical starting point, we adopt Savickas's (2005) career construction theory (CCT), which holds that individuals construct career stories that integrate "the uniqueness of an individual in her or his particular context by articulating goals, directing adaptive behavior, and imposing meaning on activities. The individual uses this self-sustaining narrative to evaluate career opportunities and negotiate social constraints" (Savickas, 2005, p. 163). CCT

is helpful as it explains the interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals construct themselves, impose direction on their paid work behavior, and make meaning of their careers (Savickas, 2005). According to CCT, it is through the narrative of an individual's career story(ies) that certain experiences are selectively highlighted and given prominence over other experiences. Indeed, narratives are integral to the process of career construction and meaning making, and are powerful conduits through which we can better understand the interconnections between *what*, *how*, and *why* people construct their careers.

According to Del Corso and Rehfuß (2011), these latter three questions taken together, clarify the three main domains of CCT. The "what" specifies "Vocational Personality" or the articulation of goals. Vocational Personality has come to be seen within CCT as a self-narrative or personal myth, composed by the person in relation to proximal familial and cultural stories. Thus the "what" "offers the best structure for making sense of one's life in an integrated way" (McAdams, 2001, p. 475). The "how" specifies "Career Adaptability" or how the person goes about directing their adaptive career-related behaviors by addressing the obstacles faced in their daily life. How the individual adapts is thought to depend on their personal problem-solving strategies (Savickas, 2008). Finally, the "why" specifies "Life Theme" or the way the person imposes meaning on their career activities. This third domain captures the "spirit that animates the movement to become complete" in one's story(ies) (Del Corso & Rehfuß, 2011, p. 335). Citing Savickas (2001, 2005), Del Corso and Rehfuß (2011) note that Life Themes are narrative representations of existential needs to turn "pain into gain, preoccupation into occupation, symptoms into strengths, tensions into intention and torments into elements" (p. 338).

Many researchers adopting CCT, and these three domains, hold that it is only through narratives that people formulate smaller stories that, when taken together, form the larger career-defining story, or even a larger self-defining life story (McAdams, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1988). How individuals narrate their world and themselves, and how they select the small stories that relay their career construction helps them maintain a cohesive sense of storied self (Bujold, 2004; McAdams, 1995; Savickas et al., 2009). The individual engaged in career construction is assumed to be "free" to pick and choose, and that they have an individualized career choice in the first place (Richardson, 2012, pp. 87–104), when, in fact, this may not be the case. Indeed, and particularly in the case of oppressed groups, the choice is often constrained by the historical and sociopolitical complexities of context, which necessarily shape the personal experiences related to the unique intersections of social class, gender, ethnicity, and so forth (P. H. Collins, 2000).

Based on this recognition of contextually constrained career-related choice, our main research question is: *in what ways are the career constructions of our sample of 40 Lebanese female professionals shaped by the complexities of context?* To answer this research question, we build a hybrid analytic framework that leverages feminist standpoint theory (FST) to enrich CCT's treatment of the relationship between context and career construction. Through this framework, our main argument asserts that contextual complexities suggest a form of "situatedness" that although it acknowledges individual choice, it simultaneously recognizes the potential constraint on choice emanating from collective experiences of historical and sociopolitical oppression. Therefore, these contextual complexities may shape women's career narratives and ultimately their construction of their career storied self. Thus, our feminist interpretation of CCT, continues to highlight, as proposed by CCT, the central importance of *context in the interpretive and interpersonal processes* of career constructions, but it also, simultaneously, draws our attention to, as proposed by FST, how such processes are historically and sociopolitically situated. As will be further argued in the sections that follow, applying feminist accounts of situatedness to CCT can significantly increase our understanding of the ways in which the complexities of context shape the construction of women's career storied self.

## 1.1 | CCT and the complexities of context

At its core, CCT is about narrative and the processes by which people construct their storied career identities in the context of their lives (Polkinghorne, 1988; Savickas, 2005). Such narratives are useful because they serve as conduits

of one's identity situated with setting, characters, plot, and theme, and because they allow for an explication of career trajectories that is more reflective of the messy, often contradictory realities than what traditional quantitative vocational choice models would suggest (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). With this approach, therefore, context is particularly important because it helps to tie meaning making to the day-to-day realities and structures experienced. Narratives allow people to link past personal experiences to their current career realities (Polkinghorne, 1988; Savickas, 2012). However, CCT does less to theorize beyond the personal, placing less emphasis on the integration of the broader historical and sociopolitical contextual influences in which they are embedded.

The focus of CCT is more about individuals vis-à-vis their experience within work-related structures, with less about the complexities of historical, sociopolitical, hegemonic, and oppressive structures tied to collective identities. The integration of such a broader and more complex contextual perspective into CCT is possible, and indeed such calls for integration have increasingly been made in reviews of career theory (Rudolph, Zacher, & Hirschi, 2019). These calls note that CCT provides conceptual space for better considerations of context, and, as Savickas (2012) notes, researchers should attempt to better fill this space with a more "contextualist perspective, one that conceptualizes [career] development as driven by adaptation to an environment rather than maturation of inner structures" (p. 147). Other prominent career scholars echo this call asserting that individuals are necessarily intimately contextualized, and therefore should be theorized as *storied* (McAdams, 2006) where subjective understanding of self is narrated and understood through using language and meaning systems (Del Corso & Rehffuss, 2011).

Our current paper develops this line of argumentation further by asserting that not all individuals make meaning in the same way. This is because the construction of their career narratives, and therefore their career storied selves, are shaped not only by their individual choices, but also by the lack of choice tied to collective oppression (i.e., by being *situated collectively*). It is the implication of acknowledging the "collective" that we wish to further explore theoretically and to integrate into the way we understand career construction of our sample of women. CCT falls short in providing a theoretical framework to unpack such historical and sociopolitical complexities of this situatedness. Therefore, we turn to FST and provide a more feminist interpretation of CCT.

## 1.2 | FST and the situated storied self

Having roots in Marxist and other critical theory beginnings, Feminist Standpoint theorists (P. H. Collins, 1990; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1998; Smith, 1979) have made multidisciplinary scholarly contributions spanning over 50 years. Although FST has heterogeneous strands of argumentation, three key principles ground the theory. The first principle asserts that what we know is necessarily socially situated. The second asserts that the social situatedness of marginalized and oppressed groups makes it possible for them to be more aware of power structures and patterns. This awareness is linked to a specific advantage—coined *epistemic privilege*, which allows those with this privilege to critically question shared oppressive realities in ways that are not possible for the nonoppressed. The final claim of FST is that knowledge-production should begin with the lives of the oppressed—that is, in the case of our study, the lives of the women themselves.

Basing our work on these three principles, brings us to pay closer attention to the ways in which career narratives of our sample of women include experiences related to oppressive contextual forces and unjust social realities that bear down on the individual, both as a single person as well as part of social groups. This dual situatedness acknowledges both the contemporary experiences of each person, as well as the collective histories of the multiple social groups to which the person belongs. Furthermore, this dual acknowledgment has formed an intimate part of substantive developments in FST over the last 3 decades. The work of P. H. Collins (2000), for example, asserts that gender cannot be understood in a vacuum, but rather that it is intertwined with other social categories. Similarly, the earlier work of hooks (1990) highlights and recognizes the intersection of many axes of oppression, which together create unique and common experiences, and relatedly create different patterns of personal and collective resistance. In this way, and as will be further fleshed out next, career construction of a given Lebanese female professional may

sometimes be usefully seen as a meaning making process through which she maintains a cohesive sense of storied self derived from her personal experiences as well as from the broader narratives of the historical collective. Therefore, these women are sometimes forced to navigate between the personal experiences and those historically rooted in sociopolitical and other power dynamics. In summary, the influence of FST is tied to the acknowledgment of the personal experiences and collective situatedness, which provides an explicit and strategic basis to view women as an oppressed collective, as opposed to only as an isolated individual.

### 1.3 | Epistemic privilege and the politicization of situated-storied self

In the process of career construction, and therefore in the process of constructing a cohesive sense of storied self, the extent to which individuals draw from the broader narratives of historical collectives, in conjunction with drawing from personal experiences will differ for different women. For those that benefit from epistemic privilege, Harding (2004) argues, they not only *speak* from particular individual experiences, but also from “historically specific social locations” (p. 4). However, not all women assume this critical positionality. Indeed, FST asserts that one does not speak from individual and collective social locations by virtue of birth or identity only; rather individuals must work at it. Hartsock (1983) asserts that it is important to remember that a standpoint is only something “achieved,” and is not simply a synonym for a “perspective.”

In “achieving” epistemically privileged standpoints, the transnational feminist scholar S. P. Mohanty (2018) argues that oppressed individuals work toward a deeper knowledge of power dynamics intertwined with social structures and their effects. She further argues that this privileged understanding therefore is a process that is “theoretical as well as political, brushing against the grain of the dominant social ideologies that naturalize social inequality” (p. 12). This focus on the political is an important one for FST, such that with a growing understanding of systemic oppressive power structures embedded in society and in social relations, individuals are often motivated to take action. From the outset in fact, FST grew, in part, “as a way of empowering oppressed groups, of valuing their experiences and of pointing toward a way to develop an *oppositional consciousness*” (S. G. Harding, 1986, p. 2). Many scholars point to FST as an articulation of the importance of perspectival differences stemming from social location, thereby opening the possibility of political strategies that help to produce a shared consciousness that fights back or opposes the experience of oppression (S. G. Harding, 1986). Hartsock (1983) argues further, with the increased achievement of an epistemically privileged standpoint, resistance against the system or status quo is often unleashed. In this resistance, there is necessarily politicization of knowledge, often leading to politicization of action—that is, *resistive engagement in concerted activities to change oppressive structures and shift power inequalities*.

This politicization further distinguishes the idea of a standpoint from the more generic idea of a “perspective” noted earlier (see S. G. Harding, 1986; Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1979). Thus, a certain kind of politicization and related political activity is associated with the those who experience oppression and who achieve epistemic privilege. This is akin to the emergence of a “critical consciousness about the nature of our social location and the difference it makes epistemically” (Wylie, 2003, p. 31). To unpack the situatedness of women’s career constructions, and any evidence of epistemic privilege, we employ a CCT-FST hybrid lens for analysis. Ultimately, we aim to unpack the career stories of 40 female professionals in Lebanon, and to trace the complexities of context (i.e., as personal experiences and collective situatedness) shaping women’s (situated) storied self across the three domains of CCT, and therefore their career constructions in Lebanon.

### 1.4 | Exploring situatedness of women’s career constructions

The complexities of context highlighted through FST form the central pillar of our hybrid framework shown in Figure 1, such that it encourages us to deepen our explorations of how context shapes career constructions. To this

end, our framework leverages FST to enrich CCT's treatment of the "what," "how," and "why" of career constructions, by integrating the considerations of contextual complexities. To interpret women's career narratives, therefore our framework draws our attention to the potential impact of "situatedness" in their career constructions. More specifically, we attempt to explicitly explore an individual's free career choices, coupled with the potential simultaneous constraints on choice emanating from collective experiences of historical and sociopolitical oppression. Theorizing contextual complexities in this way leads to a more nuanced tracing of how the personal experiences of challenge, and for some, the oppressive aspects of collective histories are selectively used to construct a sense of *career storied self*. In this way, therefore, using our hybrid lens (see Figure 1), we trace the contextual complexities across the three domains of CCT.

As shown in the first main column of Figure 1, Vocational Personality (the what)—highlights the possibility of individual "free choice" within daily life, such as the decisions and actions in direct response to critical incidents that a person experiences in their daily life. Such incidents can be understood as events (e.g., tragic occurrences, difficult experiences) that directly shape a person's career-related behavior or attitudes. In the broader management literature, this second conceptualization of context has often been referred to as critical incidents, and have been described as "seminal moments within the process of change" (Cope & Watts, 2000, p. 113). From this perspective, such incidents are thought to often inspire increased self-awareness and therefore to, sometimes lead to an accelerated process of self-learning and growth (Cope & Watts, 2000), and are also thought to be used to organize an one's career storied self (McAdams, 2006; Savickas, 2012). From a feminist standpoint, a person's individual choice is seen as potentially constrained by a broader and more complex compilation of contextual constraints comprised of the historical and sociopolitical contextual dynamics related to intersecting axes of oppression.

Column two of Figure 1 focuses on Career Adaptability (the how); that is, one's *personal experiences* about how they adapt to a specific obstacle or critical incident. The consideration of a qualitative assessment of Career Adaptability is often framed within the context of the negative impact of transitions with words such as "life trauma" and "confusing, troubling or discouraging" transitions (Savickas, 2008, p. 16). Building on this, a feminist standpoint lens would lead us to also explore the ways in which (if at all) narratives include references to *collective situatedness*, and therefore the significance of "historically specific social locations." This further draws our attention to the constraints on "free choice" due to these collective experiences of the intersecting forms of oppression, and to the ways in which women adapt to and navigate through them. This feminist reconceptualization urges an analysis that pays close attention to women's reactions to, and potential engagement with, the embedded power structures of capitalism, state structures, and the profoundly gendered phenomena of violence, war, and the patriarchal features of women's life activities (Cockburn, 2015).

The final column of Figure 1, focuses on the Life Theme (the why) within their career narrative. Life Themes concern the ways in which women strive toward a sense of self-completion (Savickas, 1997). Life themes often capture underlying needs or drives toward a sense of security, power, or love, and serve as a thread that ties together the life story of the protagonist. Generally speaking, and according to Savickas (2006), individuals create and construct their careers by doing what motivates them and that, according to Del Corso and Rehfuß (2011) indirectly points to an underlying pain or problem that an individual seeks to overcome as the protagonist in their life story. Exploring this third domain of CCT in manner that adopts a feminist standpoint acknowledges that, often, the underlying pain or problem is necessarily tied to collected experiences and, therefore, to the "hierarchical power relations that create groups, not the results of collective decision making of the individuals within the groups. Race, gender, social class, ethnicity, age, sexuality are not descriptive categories of identity applied to individuals. Instead, these elements of social structure emerge as fundamental devices that foster inequality results in groups" (P. H. Collins, 1997, p. 376). P. H. Collins (1997) argues that this kind of attention deepens our understanding of contextual obstacles, and therefore of how actual mechanisms of power can continually reproduce long standing collective experiences of collectivities. For some, the "why" relates to a sense of epistemic privilege and is grounded by a sense of resistance to oppression.

The Three Domains of Career Construction					
	The 'what' 'Vocational Personality'	The 'how' 'Career Adaptability'	The 'why' 'Life Theme'	Career Storied Self <i>sometimes situated</i>	Processes of Career Constructions <i>Interpretive/Interpersonal</i>
<b>Career Construction Theory (CCT)</b>	A career narrative composed by the person in relation to familial and cultural stories, and thus, in a manner that "offers the best structure for making sense of one's life in an integrated way".  Here the person is assumed to have "free choice" to make career-related choices and decisions.	A career narrative explaining how the individual adapts to a specific obstacle or incident, which depends on their personal problem-solving strategies.  Here the narrative is largely related to <i>personal experiences</i> about how the individual adapts to a specific obstacle or critical incident, which depends on their personal problem-solving strategies.	A career narrative about the "spirit that animates the movement to become complete" in one's story(ies).  Here we see the emergence of a coherent sense of the career storied self, where the career narratives are primarily about personal experiences only, and therefore are individualistic and centered within the individual's work and career.	The individual constructs a cohesive story unique to self.	Guided by the what (vocational personality), the how (career adaptability), and the why (life theme).  Together these three domains impose direction on a person's paid work behavior, and make meaning of their career.
<b>Feminist Standpoint CCT</b>	A career narrative acknowledges the constraints of contextual complexities.  Here the person's individual choice is seen as potentially constrained by historical and sociopolitical contextual dynamics related to intersecting axes of oppression.	A career narrative continues to explain <i>personal experiences</i> about how the individual adapts to a specific obstacle or critical incident, however, additionally the narratives also include notions of <i>collective situatedness</i> .  Here, in addition to selectively highlighting certain experiences of critical incidents, the significance of "historically specific social locations" is also included. Prominence is often more likely to be given to collective situatedness, and therefore, to the experience of collective oppression.	A career narrative continues to be animated by wanting to become complete" in one's story(ies).  Here, the career narrative is not only about personal experiences, but also about the greater collective. For some, the 'why' relates to a sense of epistemic privilege and is grounded by a sense of resistance to oppression.	The individual does not always tend to construct a story unique to self only, but rather, the 'why' is sometimes influenced by a politicized spirit to resist and overcome oppression.  The career story is always constrained and situated by collective situatedness and therefore, potentially, by deeper knowledge of power dynamics impacting their experience as part of the collective.	Guided by the what (vocational personality), the how (career adaptability), and the why (life theme), and, additionally by the potential acknowledgement of situatedness and the potential achievement of epistemic privilege.  Achieved epistemic privilege produces a shared consciousness that pushes one to fight back or oppose the experience of oppression.  In this way, epistemic privilege may lead to a <i>politicization of career narratives</i> and therefore to career decisions and choices that are resistive and attempt to change oppressive structures and shift power inequalities.

FIGURE 1 Career Construction Theory (CCT), feminist CCT, and the (situated) career storied self

Taken together, feminist considerations of context across the three domains sets the three pillars of our hybrid framework, and encourages an unpacking of the complexities of context as part-and-parcel of women's career narratives and thus of their career storied self. The framework encourages unpacking in a manner that pays attention to *both* the personal experiences of particular critical incidents in their daily lives, as well as, where relevant, their situatedness tied to the collective experience of the intersecting forms of historical and sociopolitical oppression. Not all women's narratives are expected to include in-depth reflections on collective situatedness. This difference is potentially telling and will likely provide a basis to trace differences in career patterns between those women whose narratives include such feminist considerations versus those that include more individualistic references to personal experiences only. Exploring narratives in this way, through our hybrid analytic framework therefore, highlights the possibility of looking beyond the individual and the individualist notions of free choice dominating modern epistemology, and encourages a richer exploration of subjects as situated knowers.

## 1.5 | The case of Lebanese women working in Lebanon

Lebanon has a complex and harsh employment context for women. At base, the Lebanese context is characterized by a turbulent geopolitical situation due to a combination of the disproportionate influx of refugees, the recurrent

tensions between sectarian, feudal, and tribal groups in the nation, and the intermittent rise of border tensions (Afiouni & Karam, 2019; UNHCR, 2015). Exacerbating this harshness for women are the widespread traditional patriarchal gendered work norms restricting the career and leadership opportunities for many women (Tlais & Kauser, 2010). Further adding complexity, are the documented overt contradictions of broader gender norms in the country. That is, although attitudes toward sex, nationality rights, and inheritance are largely discriminatory, women also experience relatively more visible freedoms in terms of dress, movement, and social interactions than many of their Arab counterparts (Haghighat, 2013).

These freedoms are not, however, characteristic of the widely documented legislative barriers (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Indeed, the lack of a civil code governing personal status laws leaves legal administration as the “exclusive responsibility of religious institutions, which subscribe to the notion that men should be at the head of the family unit” (Salameh, 2014, p. 2). Restrictions also exist to economic rights where, despite legislative amendments to the Labor Law (UNDP, 2016), the prevalence of an archaic patriarchal system with stereotyped gender roles perpetuate the prevailing inequitable systems as evidenced by the dismal performance of Lebanon on global gender indicators noted earlier.

Lebanese women face widely documented barriers to starting a career and to upward mobility within the managerial hierarchies (Jamali, Sidani, & Safieddine, 2005; Sidani, Konrad, & Karam, 2015). Karam and Afiouni (2014) note that the barriers to workforce entry should be a key focus on women empowerment initiatives, in order to combat what they refer to as the *bursting pipeline* “where more and more Arab women are prepared with the necessary knowledge and skills, but are unable to secure employment” (Karam & Afiouni, 2014, p. 27). Despite these constraints, however, there is growing evidence of the possibility for successful career trajectories for Lebanese women (Afiouni et al., 2019).

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

Our methodological approach builds on Savickas et al.'s (2009) life-design narrative methodology. Based on the epistemology of social constructionism, this methodology emphasizes the view that meanings and knowledge are culturally embedded and made possible through the individual's use of language and narrative (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Thus, the construction of narratives about careers brings together an individual's idiosyncratic experiences with the broader aspects of their life (Bruner, 2004; Bujold, 2004). Furthermore, our feminist interpretation of the three domains of CCT pushes us to consider the broader aspects of not only a person's life, but also of the more abstract situatedness of lives and experiences within the historical collective (P. H. Collins, 2000). In this way, therefore, career narratives are treated as situated accounts of personal and collective experiences, events, and incidents occurring over time. The value of narrative approaches lies in contextually and culturally locating career issues and in encouraging individuals to construct their own reality within the contexts and cultures in which their career development occurs (C. Watson, 2006).

One of the core assumptions of narrative analysis is that it is subjective and more concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes (Josselson & Lieblich, 1995). Therefore, we explore the narratives of each person's sense of career storied self, paying particular attention to women's experienced circumstances, critical incidents and other salient factors that influenced their career trajectories (Del Corso & Rehffuss, 2011). This entails identifying elements of the career story related to the specific biography and influences to which she has been exposed. We also trace the meaning she makes of her contextualized experiences, such that it informs her sense of career storied self. In this way, we are led to explore the meaning an individual gives to reality that is necessarily coconstructed in a social, historical, and cultural context (Savickas et al., 2009), and potentially in the context of historical collective oppression (P. H. Collins, 2000). Taken together, this kind of narrative analysis provides insights about women's careers in a manner, that is life-long, holistic, and complexly contextual. It is also considered as an empowering social science in that it provides participants with the setting for voicing their own story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

## 2.1 | Sample and data collection

The data in this article are drawn from a larger research project, funded by the UNESCO that aimed to showcase the career stories of 40 Lebanese women engaged in successful careers. Public announcements were posted on social media calling for the nominations of female role models from across Lebanon. The announcement specified that the women should be citizens, born, raised, and currently working in Lebanon, and should not come from “wealthy, powerful, or political families.” In total, 65 women were nominated, of which 40 fit the selection criteria. Taken together, these women represented different religious sects, Lebanese governorates, and professions (see Table 1).

Each woman was invited to tell her career story during a face-to-face semistructured interview, which included seven questions and lasted about 2 h. Although all questions were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim; only two questions were analyzed for the current study; namely: (1) “You are a successful professional that has been nominated by your community as a female role model. Can you please tell me your career story?” and (2) “Can you tell me a story which illustrates one or two of the most challenging periods (and later more rewarding periods) in your career?” Where the first question is open-ended and left the participants to tell their story freely, the second question employed the critical incident technique guiding them to focus on specific incidents. This interview format followed recommendations of Riessman (2005) to give more control to the participant through encouraging “narrativization” by asking participants to tell stories, with preference given to open-endedness (p. 54).

## 2.2 | Data analysis

The basic idea of the narrative approach is to initially read the data and become familiar with it while considering important concepts and tone. Attention is given to time, place, plot, and the voices of the participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) across the three domains of career construction (Del Corso & Rehfuß, 2011). We started the analysis by having each of the authors separately read the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the participants’ narratives in relation to our main research question about the ways in which *the career constructions of our sample are shaped by the complexities of context*. Each narrative was then coded for themes to add insight regarding the individual’s experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We, therefore, conducted a thematic analysis of the narratives whereby each author independently extracted examples of “the what,” “the how,” and “the why,” paying particular attention to descriptions of contextual considerations using NVIVO12. In this way, we identified examples of personal experiences of critical incidents, as well as examples of collective historical experiences that were described by each woman. All interviews were read thoroughly, looking for similarities and differences, and grouping them accordingly. The results were then organized into different categories representing all three domains of career construction.

Second, we reread the narratives again to understand how women make sense of context as defined by our framework in Figure 1. To help us dissect the domains further, we loosely adopted the idea of a *theme* and *plot* (Del Corso & Rehfuß, 2011; McAdams et al., 2001). Focusing on theme and plot in the meaning making process is useful as it allows us to better understand the situatedness of the storied self. Themes, on the one hand, concern the ways in which the women actively organize their career story(ies) into a meaningful whole. It is around the theme that experiences of critical incidents and, if any, references to the collective history “are gathered into the unity of the story” (Bujold, 2004, p. 471).

As a final part of this second step, we were interested to explore for evidence of *epistemic privilege* between and across the women. To do this, we searched for links between the personal experience of critical incidents and references to the collective historical context and their combined link to different levels of politicization in the career stories. Taken together, our analysis process was iterative, with disagreements discussed and resolved through intense discussion and re-reading of the original transcripts. For example, some statements included

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Latest university degree	Major	Profession	Birth Mohafaza	Theme <sup>a</sup>
Carla	60	Single	0	PhD	Chemistry	Professor	South Lebanon	1
Safa	38	Single	0	MA	Communication Arts	Co-Owner	Mount Lebanon	1
Sarya	40	Single	0	EMBA	Business	Regional Manager	North Lebanon	1
Samirah	47	Single	0	BA	English Literature	Manager	Mount Lebanon	1
Rania	32	Single	0	BA	Food Science Management	Innovation Manager	Mount Lebanon	1
Mary	35	Single	0	PhD	Electrical and Communications engineering	Professor and Researcher	North Lebanon	1
Raya	35	Single	0	BA	Informatics and Telecommunication engineering	Software engineer	North Lebanon	1
Andrea	45	Divorced	0	BS	Biology	Science Teacher	Beirut	1
Manal	55	Single	0	BA	History	General Director	South Lebanon	1
Joumana	44	Divorced	1	BA	Public Relations	Social Media Specialist/Strategist	South Lebanon	1
Wafaa	31	Married	0	BA	Graphic Design	Graphic, Web and Mobile Interface Designer	South Lebanon	1
Lama	47	Married	2	MA	Production	Executive Producer and Co-Owner	Mount Lebanon	1
Hala	51	Married	3	BA	Business Administration	Senior Manager	Mount Lebanon	1

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Latest university degree	Major	Profession	Birth	Theme <sup>a</sup>
Leyla	40	Married	3	Emergency Medicine	Emergency Medicine	Emergency Physician	Mount Lebanon	1
Ameena	34	Married	3	MA	Engineering Management	Founder and CEO	Beirut	1
Hiam	51	Married	3	MA	Business Management	Business Development Manager	Mount Lebanon	1
Tamara	59	Married	4	MS	Nutrition	Dietician and CEO	Beirut	1
Hania	60	Single	0	BS	Business Administration	President and CEO	Beirut	2
Taline	41	Single	0	NA	NA	Manager	Bekaa	2
Aisha	28	Single	0	BA	Graphic Design	Graphic Designer	South Lebanon	2
Zalfa	67	Divorced	2	BA	Sociology	Founder and CEO	South Lebanon	2
Zeina	59	Married	0	MA	Sociology	Freelancer	Mount Lebanon	2
Amal	82	Married	NA	BA	History of Civilization	Journalist	Beirut	2
Maysun	43	Married	1	BA	Audio-Visuals	Filmmaker	Mount Lebanon	2
Samar	44	Married	2	BA	Nutrition, Food Science,	Founder and CEO	South Lebanon	2
Mariam	57	Married	2	BA	Law	Lawyer	North Lebanon	2
Maysa	48	Married	3	EMBA	Pharmacy	Owner of a pharmaceutical company	Mount Lebanon	2
Rita	50	Married	3	BA	Public Administration	Jewellery Designer	Beirut	2

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Latest university degree	Major	Profession	Birth Mohafaza	Theme <sup>a</sup>
Abla	50	Single	0	Medical Social Worker		Founder of an NGO	South Lebanon	3A
Nura	48	Married	1	BA	Journalism	Media Manager	South Lebanon	3A
Liliane	50	Married	2	MBA	Business	Manager	Mount Lebanon	3A
Vivienne	53	Married	3	BA	Law	Founder and CEO	Bekaa	3A
Marwa	67	Married	3	PhD	History and Archaeology	Professor	Mount Lebanon	3A/B
Carol	56	Married	3		Marketing and Communication	Communication Consultant	Mount Lebanon	3A/B
Farah	37	Single	0	BA	History	Social entrepreneur and activist	Mount Lebanon	3B
Nada	38	Single	0	BA	Literature	Activist and Gender Consultant	Mount Lebanon	3B
Bissan	41	NA	NA	EMBA	Business	Lawyer and Senior Associate	Mount Lebanon	3B
Sara	39	Married	NA	MA	Sociology	Researcher	South Lebanon	3B
Jinane	59	Married	4	BA	NA	Actress, Writer, and Professor	South Lebanon	3B
Abir	43	Married	2	PhD		Consultant	Mount Lebanon	3B

<sup>a</sup>Themes were obtained following the last round of analysis and further explicated in the empirical findings section.

references to personal experiences and collective historical, sociopolitical factors and there was a disagreement how to categorize them. An example is the quote by Sara: “On the professional level it was hard for me as a woman to impose myself at the workplace and gain my colleagues and clients’ trust.” After discussion, the researchers decided to categorize this statement as a critical incident as it referred more to a personal experience than a historic disadvantage.

### 2.3 | Empirical findings: Women's career constructions

Based on our hybrid analytic framework, and therefore guided by a feminist reading of the what (Vocational Personality), the how (Career Adaptability), and the why (Life Theme), our analysis revealed differences in the overarching career construction narratives in terms of the extent to which contextual considerations were salient. At one extreme, there are those career narratives where context was less noted, and on the other extreme are the career narratives where context figured quite centrally. Where with the first, the individual seems to construct a story unique to self—*Career Storied Self*, with the second the individual does not always tend to construct a story unique to self only, but the narrative is influenced by a politicized spirit to resist and overcome collective oppression—*Situated Career Storied Self*. Our analysis also revealed a pattern of storied self which was in between; that is, neither free from contextual considerations nor centrally constrained by collective situatedness.

Overall, therefore, our feminist informed CCT analysis revealed three prominent patterns of interpretative and interpersonal processes of career constructions. Indeed, the three patterns emerged each with distinctive themes and plots relating to either advancing their careers and professional field (Vocational Expert), seeking self-vindication (Adaptive Rebel), or engaging in activism (Sympathetic Activism vs. Epistemically Privileged Activism). These various patterns show how women in our sample make sense of contextual influences and how patterns of meaning making may vary between them. In what follows, we present our analysis including references to the theme and plot of the career narratives, while also paying attention to the salience and chronology in their story(ies) (Savickas, 1995).

Pattern I: Meaning making as the Vocational Expert focused on advancing the professional field.

For 17 women, much of their narratives seemed to present a Vocational Personality aligned with a sense of individual choice to advance the field or industry. We labeled this group “Vocational Expert,” and although the individual choices varied between women, they tended to highlight decisions that concerned professional development and working hard toward breakthroughs and innovations (the what). The women’s narratives highlighted personal experiences of challenges faced and the steps they took to overcome them. Here, the women seemed to actively construct storylines by selectively highlighting and giving prominence to their experience of certain critical incidents within their career (the how). These incidents largely focused on overcoming task-based challenges, with little or no mention of the broader collective situatedness (i.e., historical and sociopolitical context). There were significant points in time marked by work-related events and challenges where the women described how they adapted to these challenges through specific decisions or changes related to school, university, or work. Indeed, mention of these contextual challenges focused on resource or work-related constraints generally, and mention of critical incidents tended to note moments when they realized their personal limitations to advance their work. Such a moment was often a significant point in the plot because it marked a time when she evaluated her career opportunities and tried to overcome experienced constraints by choosing to invest in overcoming key knowledge- or skill-based gaps.

Finally, by looking at how these women construct their goals and career direction, we note that they often employed examples falling within a larger Life Theme that was field- or industry-oriented. What seems to animate the stories and give meaning to such actions was fundamentally related to the desire or ambition to contribute professionally by, for example, building a successful start-up, achieving higher revenue, and so forth (the why). Next, we provide the exemplar narrative of Ameena. We provide a second narrative of Hala in the Appendix.

Ameena's career narrative highlights her journey as a scientist and successful entrepreneur who built her company from the ground up. She was raised and educated in large city and holds a bachelor's and master's degree in engineering. She is married and a mother of three children. Ameena describes her career as a long journey where she was faced with career decisions, and in turn, made numerous personal choices that shaped her career trajectory. She states:

I believe that no one influenced me to go on this path, I was very determined in becoming a mechanical engineer. I think my brain is configured in that way. I could not do any other major other than mechanical engineering. No one directed me or advised me to be an engineer. It was in my blood so it was an easy major for me.

This vocational identity was clearly visible early on in Ameena's life and was anchored even further when she started her career. She describes how she was driven by the ambition to excel and not to be like any other engineer. Therefore, her narrative describes how she opted for a challenging career, working for three years in a leading Lebanese company, then moving to work for an additional 7 years in another one, before moving to start her own company.

The overarching theme reflected in Ameena's story is being the Industrious Expert who focused on innovative ideas and on trying to get others to understand her ideas. Much of the plot and chronology of her story were animated by the problem-solving strategies she adopted to overcome the different technical challenges she faced when launching and managing her own business. She notes:

The challenge I faced when I came up with the inception of launching my company, was that no one understood what I was doing. No one understood the business concept. So, I was fighting alone trying to communicate the message to everyone so as to seek help. It was not easy.

In her narrative, we note a high level of adaptability, reflected by her willingness and ability to overcome these challenges (the how). While narrating her story, she describes herself in terms such as "I excelled," "I was determined." Indeed, her narrative reveals that she had a clear goal and the self-confidence to achieve that goal, despite the technical challenges and the people around her:

Some people will help and some people will work against you. Those who appreciate what you are doing and see the good in what you are doing, will encourage you more. Those who feel jealous, will always try to put up blocks in your way and try to restrain you or suppress you. I think that I should not be affected by either. If you are determined and you know what you are doing, then you should not listen to anyone. You will reach the goal.

Another strategy she implemented to overcome the barriers faced is taking the time to tell others about the importance of her vision and mission:

I had to educate many people in order to align them with my mission and vision. This was the most challenging part. To convince others about what I was doing.

From an FST perspective, Ameena's narrative did not include any references to contextual constraints, be it in the form of personal experiences of oppression or discrimination, or in reference to the wider collective historical context related to being a woman. When the interviewer pressed for examples, she noted that:

Personally, I have not witnessed inequities nor any gender inequalities. If you have the skills, the qualities, the character, you can compete with everyone. It happened with me, I was competing with men and I imposed myself. It depends on the personality. I personally see no differences.

Within Ameena's narrative we see the emergence of a coherent sense of the career storied self, where the career narrative is primarily about personal experiences, and therefore are individualistic and centered within the individual's work, overcoming technical challenges, and building a career.

From an FST perspective, Ameena's narrative, while making one reference to the structural context in Lebanon, was largely void of references to gendered contextual constraints or to the wider collective historical context related to being a woman:

Because we are living in Lebanon and the opportunities were not there, I could not pursue my dream career. But this was not because of gender discrimination, it was because of the general lack of opportunities for both men and women.

I never felt that I could not do things because I was a woman; I never had that issue neither in school nor at home, university or work. My interaction with men does not differ from my interaction with women.

Another example of a Vocational Expert is the narrative of Hala, as shown in the Appendix S1. Hala is a senior partner at an international consulting firm. Her narrative shows a strong vocational identity (the what) as a business consultant. Similar to Ameena, Hala had a clear career objective early on, and her narrative suggests that she saw this career choice as a personal decision that she embraced as a young adult (the what). Her narrative centralizes the self in relation to her family and professional circle, with little mention of the larger contextual factors. Hala's narrative includes description of the technical challenges she faced as well as the strategies that she adopted to overcome them (the how). Taken together, Hala's career narrative attributes most of her successes to her personal characteristics; she describes herself as always displaying "a positive attitude" and trying to "mitigate conflicts at work." Hala's narrative also seems to be animated by individualistic and self-focused experiences within her work and career spheres, with the ultimate goal of succeeding as a professional and advancing her field.

Pattern II: Meaning making as an Adaptive Rebel seeking self-vindication.

The stories of 11 women, although very different in terms of specific experiences, all seemed to share a similar Vocational Personality narrated in relation to rebelling against some form of patriarchal role expectation or authority in order to prove their ability, value or self-worth. The decisions shared in their narratives were often described in response to familial and/or sociocultural constraints, and therefore characterized "the what" of their career storied self. In constructing their career narratives, the women in this group tended to highlight career-related instances where they adopted strategies with the aim of "proving" themselves. That is, each specific storyline about 'the how' gave prominence to feelings of self-vindication after achieving something she was told was not possible or not appropriate. Many of the women provided deep descriptions of obstacles that they experienced early in life where people or events had imposed constraints on her personal choices, behaviors, and/or opportunities.

When taken together, the career stories tended to be about the strategies that they adopted to liberate themselves from restrictive experiences within the family as a child or adolescent, or within the workplace as a young adult. Finally, the larger life stories, although sometimes including reasons to help others, tended to be mostly self-focused, and animated by the experiences of being held down or marginalized on a personal level. In this sense, "the why" was dominated by a focus on the self and aimed, as noted earlier, at self-vindication. The career narratives of Mariam and Zeina are good examples. We present Mariam's narrative next.

Mariam is a lawyer, raised and educated in Lebanon. She comes from a village in Northern Lebanon and is a holder of a bachelor degree in Law. The plot of Mariam's career story was mostly centered around her childhood

and early adulthood in the village. These experiences seem to have significantly shaped her career goals and directions (the what). When asked to tell her career story, she began by describing growing up in a conservative Muslim community and a family of modest means. Much of her narrative reflected on herself in relation to familial and cultural experiences, and in terms of how she adapted to her circumstances by rebelling (the how):

I was born and raised in a humble village, at a time when education for females was breaking down the habits and traditions, if not challenging them. I was among the first female generation who graduated from university. Since childhood, I believed in my ability to succeed.

High levels of self-confidence and feeling in control of her career trajectory were reflected in her story. These feelings were further nourished by the support of her teachers. She also notes the support of her mother who, she explains, never learned to read, but encouraged her daughters to study and to stand up against the negative gendered norms:

Teachers used to praise me and tell my mother about my successes, which made her more determined to teach us in order to avoid being illiterate like her. And this is how my mother planted in me the seeds of my self-confidence and the will to change, and to revolt by the means of education and work. She built in me the dream that I achieved.

Mariam provided many examples of when she was judged negatively because she pursued a law career, and she felt that she was at a career disadvantage because of her gender. She described a particular instance when she was in a meeting with male colleagues who were actively trying to “*make me feel that I am at a disadvantage, that I am inferior in terms of knowledge and seriousness.*” She suggests that this is an instance of “*gender discrimination that is a prevalent issue. An issue that I continuously experience at work.*” Mariam also detailed specific negative critical incidents that continue to happen at work and that detract from her ability to perform, suggesting that:

There are also a lot of minor harassments, where they always focus on the women lawyers’ beauty and not on her intelligence. Also, there are discrepancies in pay, this I think is because clients believe that women only work for “prestige” and, so, any sum of money would be more than enough for her fees.

Bombarded with these contextual influences and incidents, Mariam’s choices seem to be animated by the spirit to rebel against them (the why), by working extra hard to prove herself, noting that:

She wanted to make people acknowledge me and say that I am a good female lawyer from [the village]. I had to be extra strong, competent, and courageous and, at the same time perceived as a conservative woman without breaking the culture expectations and the beliefs of my society.

She further described the lengths that she would go to ‘not be like’ the women in her community who conformed to sociocultural expectations, stating that “*seeing those women gave me a push to avoid being that type of woman, but rather to seek knowledge to change and prove myself.*” This spirit to be different animated Mariam’s story (the why) with a similar thread throughout the timeline of her story. She describes as sense of wanting to cut a different path from the early years in the village:

My choice to pursue the legal path originated from the roots of the village lifestyle. Complemented with my learning about Indira Gandhi - the woman governing India. What does her name invoke, but the thought of Mahatma Gandhi’s journey against injustice and rejection. As well as the fight against

peoples' enslavement and the struggle to realize freedom. And "The Prophet" of Khalil Gibran with the seeds of political awareness. And, to Simone de Beauvoir and the rebellion-women style. All this, lead me to choose the legal career path as a message in the first place and a career in the second place.

Zeina narrative is a second example of this pattern. Zeina is a journalist and a poet. She was raised and educated in Mount Lebanon and holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology. The plot of Zeina's story begins early in her life, where she describes always having had a clear career goal (the what)—to become a writer. Significant points in time in her narrative seemed to reflect changes in this career path as she struggled to overcome obstacles, pay gaps and to prove herself. She describes her career experiences as full of oppression leading up to the point where she decided to quit and become a freelancer.

These obstacles faced did not deter Zeina from pursuing her career goals, but fueled her determination to overcome them, which shows a high level of Career Adaptability (the how). When talking about how she addressed the challenges faced, she often used vocabulary related to war, as if she was fighting a battle throughout her career to succeed. Indeed, most of Zeina's narrative seemed to be guided by a particular plot constructed around her personal self, and the experiences that seem to animate her story (the why) related to a sense of being held down or marginalized on a personal level. In this sense, 'the why' was dominated by a focus on the self and aimed at self-vindication.

#### Pattern III: The Sympathetic versus Epistemically Privileged Activist.

The career stories of the remaining 12 women tended to be vividly marked by sense of activism, where the Vocational Personality aligned with a need or want to improve the lives and circumstances of different oppressed people. For these women, their career-related choices and decisions were individual, but also inherently constrained by the historical and sociopolitical contextual dynamics embedded within their lived realities. Looking more closely at the narratives it became clear that there were actually two salient problem-solving strategies that this third group adopted ('the how'): (1) *Sympathetic Activism* and (2) *Epistemically Privileged Activism*. Strategy A reflects career narratives dominated by a description of the drive to be sympathetic and to help underprivileged communities or groups cope with their experienced oppression. The narratives in Strategy B are dominated by a deeper sense of responsibility and a politicized drive to fight against the structures that perpetuate collective inequalities.

The career narratives corresponding to each of these two strategies had nuanced plot particularities. Strategy A included descriptions of personal successes and was organized with a chronology documenting the personal transition from one form of helping to broader forms. Strategy B included distinctive description of moments of awakening and of coming to be painstakingly aware of systems of domination, histories of collective oppression, and hegemonic structures that perpetuate inequalities. This latter strategy tended to include critical incidents that seemed to highlight the significance of "historically specific social locations" (Harding, 2004) and broader systems of collective oppression.

In relation to Life Themes ('the why'), the second strategy is aligned with a continuous struggle, not least of which is made all the more complex by the difficult path of achieving epistemic privilege. In contrast to women whose career narratives were dominated by Strategy A, those affiliated Strategy B tended to have Life Themes that were both *communal in nature* and *politicized*. We now flesh out this summary further below.

*Sympathetic Privileged Activism*. The career narratives dominated by this Strategy A tended to encompass a strong sense of *sympathy* toward others. Savior undertones sometimes colored these narratives; that is, a sense of being able and motivated to help underprivileged communities and groups cope with immediate life circumstances and threats. The experiences and actions selectively used to construct their narratives often concerned the effects of war and pain, observed from a distance and from a place wherein they were not personally affected. The women with this type of career narrative were often situated in positions of privilege vis-à-vis those who they wanted to assist. Additionally, it seemed that the storylines were often animated by the successive successes that they attained in their schooling and careers, and the plot often unfolded from one accomplishment to another broader accomplishment. The following narratives of Abla and Vivienne (shown in the Appendix S1) are cases in point.

Abla grew up in South Lebanon. She is single and holds a bachelor's degree in medical social work. When asked, Abla began her career story by self-identifying as a gender activist and as the founder of a women's rights NGO (the what). Much of her narrative was constructed around the theme of helping women be more empowered against violence. The plot of her narrative starts during her college years, when she recalled a particular encounter that set her on this path of helping others. She states:

During my third year at university, I attended a seminar on violence against women. They had two days of induction for introducing the topic and at that time I was inspired by this social worker that was coming from the Lebanese Council. She inspired me, and really at that exact moment I felt that I wanted to be like her. I thought to myself that I wanted to do what she did and I was very moved by the topic.

A second significant point, not long after the first, that also shaped the unfolding of her career, occurred during her fourth year at university. She recounts being recommended by her professor to take a part-time job at a national center combatting violence against women. She explains that her supervisor's recommendation was an important point in her career in that it was then that she realized that: *"I wanted to dedicate my life to this field, it is the cause that I really wanted to work on."*

After climbing the career ladder in this organization for several years and gaining significant experience, Abla explains how she felt the need to start her own NGO with a similar mission. She explains that she decided to start a new women's rights organization that:

Would allow me to share all the experience I had acquired and to serve the Middle East and North Africa. It is more a resource center providing resources, tools, technical expertise and trainings to people who would like to work within this important cause.

Abla's storyline moved from an interest to working in a local center to founding a regional organization. Much of the plot was also animated by the difficulty of such work, and in working in this domain:

It was difficult to have this career because I had to fight a lot, since not everyone appreciates success. The more you are successful, the more you have people trying to fight you. I don't want to call them enemies, but you cannot be a person that everyone loves. Especially in this field, because Lebanon is a civil society country, and here NGOs compete with each other.

Despite the difficulties, Abla was not discouraged and seems to have successfully deployed adaptive strategies (the how) to build her career. She notes that hard work, and being driven by the mission and vision to make a change in society pushed her forward:

I always say I am a visionary person and this is how I describe myself. I am also very stubborn in a sense that whatever I envision, I will do regardless of what is needed in terms of effort or investment to see it come to life. I do not believe in dreams because I do believe people create the dreams and transform them into realities.

Abla's career narrative also seemed to be animated by references to the drive to lead and motivate people toward her vision. But she further explains, that such a drive comes at a cost:

I paid a high price to be as successful as I am today, of course. I dedicated a lot of my time to this work, and often at the expense of my personal relationships. People call me an activist, and now it is solely

how I see myself. I am an activist. Activism is about continuing in something-in a cause. For me activism is like paving the way to sustain the kinds of relief that we are providing. I am just a person who believes in change in the society.

Another example of this first subcategory of the third theme comes from the narrative of Vivienne an entrepreneur and owner of a women only Taxi company. She grew up in Mount Lebanon and is a holder of a dual degree in Business and Law. Vivienne's narrative was dominated by a drive to engage in more meaningful work, and in a career that would help others and not just be profit-oriented. The plot of her career story starts by recounting an earlier time in her life when she helped others. Vivienne's career narrative jumps from early life to being a successful bank manager. She also describes the transition from banking to launching her own business designed to serve women (the what).

Reflecting on her decision, and similar to Abba, much of the plot was also animated by the financial risk Vivienne incurred in starting her company. Vivienne's narrative captures her high level of adaptability, that was manifested in self-confidence, and in her resourcefulness to solve problems, despite any kind of lack of support. Similar to other women in this subtheme, Vivienne's narrative was animated by a drive to be helpful to others (the why), in this case, through the provision of safe transportation.

*Epistemically Privileged Activism.* For the remaining women in our sample, an explicit and deeper sense of responsibility characterized their career narratives. Indeed, the Life Themes highlighted in their career stories were largely communal in nature and dominated by an acknowledgment of collective histories of oppression. The women described oppression in the form of, for example, structures and processes perpetuating gender-based violence, human rights violations, and deep-seated sociocultural prejudice. Much of their career stories were overtly politicized, with the women actively organizing their career story(ies) into a meaningful and holistic struggle to combat or change oppression.

The overarching strategies were about struggling to better understand the oppression, to become aware of its span and implications, and to bring about change toward a more dignified existence for those historically subjugated through career-related actions of an activist nature. Some sort of chronology of awakening was clear in each of these women's stories and they provided rich description of different experiences that made them increasingly aware of oppression. The plot was often animated by descriptions of gaining awareness taking actions that seemed to progressively become more politicized (i.e., more overtly resisting oppressive structures). The following narratives of Nada and Farah are cases in point.

Nada is an activist and a gender consultant from Mount Lebanon. She holds of a bachelor's degree in English Literature. She is single with no kids. Nada's career narrative is dominated specifically by a concern for human rights. This concern underpins much of her work as an activist and communications consultant (the what). The plot of her narrative starts early as she describes growing up in a conservative family in a homogenous Christian community. She makes different references to the prevalence of sectarian divides across the country and to how she specifically experienced isolation from other religious groups as a young adult. She shares her frustration with this division stating that:

Sectarianism in Lebanon is so bad, the war and the aftermath of war. It is so bad that you could grow up for 22-23 years and not even know that there are others in this country; there are others different than me, different cultures, and other religions.

The 2006 war between the Hezbollah paramilitary forces in Lebanon and the state of Israel was particularly salient point in her storyline. She describes this 33-day event as a time where she had

an awakening. The war was weird because I was without a job for a while and I was just sitting at home doing nothing, and I realized that there is something wrong in this country, very fundamental about my

own beliefs about the country. So, I was reading and thinking why are we idle while people are being hit by bombs. I did not understand the war and I felt very ashamed that I did not understand it.

This experience then pushed her to quit her job and to become a human rights activist. She explains:

When I understood there is something bigger than that, and when I understood oppression, I started seeing it, I started understanding a lot of things and I decided that I wanted to be an activist.

Nada notes that she did not choose an easy career path. She describes the various challenges that she faced resulting from not following a mainstream career:

Of course, you live in a mainstream world where everything is mainstream, and people place a lot of value on this mainstream job/space. So a lot of times you do not have a stable income, a lot of times you have to stop what you are doing for a while so you can go back to work and make some money and then continue what you are doing.

The challenges relayed in her narrative not only capture a personal experience, but also make reference to the collective history of oppression of minorities and women:

There is a fundamental lack of women in the political sphere ... and they [people] think it is normal. Top level journalists, political analysts in the country, are all men. These numbers indicate that there is a huge fundamental problem. It is true that they [women] are the majority in schools, they [women] are the majority in colleges and the majority who have degrees, but they [women] reach a certain ceiling in Lebanon which is very low.

At the beginning, it was a lot more difficult to do activism in the country, especially in terms of taboo issues. It was scary, it was underground, and there were a lot of threats. When you said the word "feminist," it was like a curse word, or "activist," they were like who are these people. ... Once you are in the public arena, the challenges are mostly external. Stress, fights with people, battles.

Nada's awareness of this historical collective oppression facing women placed her in an epistemically privileged position to overcome them (the how), not only to achieve her personal career goals, but to try to address these systemic and historical oppressive forces. Her adaptive strategies seemed to revolve around hard work:

There is not much room for you to go, and if you want to go places you have to be exceptional, you have to be super smart, super talented, super hard working and super sacrificial to get to these places.

Nada not only speaks for herself and the critical incidents she faced. Her narrative is animated by a concern for the oppressed groups in the country and wants to do right by them (the why). She chose activism despite no monetary returns, and she describes how hard it is to keep going, yet she still keeps going:

I am talking about something very dear to me. I am talking about myself and my family and friends. Especially that in Lebanon, nothing changes. So to keep the hope and keep running and keep believing in what you are doing and to keep inventing new ways of doing activism so people are not bored. This is very difficult. The stress level is there for sure, but there is not even compensation to balance off this stress level.

Nada's awakening further fueled her activism, she describes herself as a consultant, advocating for various causes that are dear to her and her narrative clearly captures a politicized career:

I use the term "activist" which I think is a very good term to define you if you are someone who does things to change social and economic justice issues and such. However, in terms of actual roles, what I do is I do actual work only a few times a year. I do consulting mostly for international organizations so I can do activism for the other nine or ten months of the year. So in terms of professional capacity, I am a gender consultant, a gender expert. Now I am becoming more of a political consultant for the region.

Our last narrative comes from Farah who is a social entrepreneur from the Metn province. She holds a bachelor's degree in History. Farah's career narrative is similarly dominated by a concern for human rights, mainly focused on women. Her concern for fighting against gender-based violence shapes much of her Vocational Personality (the what). The plot of her narrative also starts early in her life as she describes a specific critical incident of sexual harassment that happened to her when she first joined the workforce. Such experiences, she explains, helped to focus her efforts on being resilient and adaptive (the how), and fight not only for herself, but for other oppressed women. Similar to Nada and to other women within this subgroup, Farah not only speaks for herself and the critical incidents she faced, but her narrative is also animated by a concern for the oppressed women in the country (the why). She chose social entrepreneurship and activism because she wanted to address the collective historical oppression that women in Lebanon endure.

### 3 | DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Every person can tell a career story, picking and choosing the salient events and experiences that they perceive to have shaped their career trajectories. The power of stories rests in the narrative constructions of what individuals choose to include as part of the process of making sense of their careers. Savickas (2015) notes that career constructions "evolve through explicit autobiographical reflection" that deepens people's knowledge of their own lives, that "provides possibilities for sense-making and meaning construction" and that "reveal their current understanding of contexts, circumstances, and roles" (pp. 11–12). In the current study, our main interest was to explore the latter, with a specific focus on how individuals understand context through the construction of their career storied selves. Through adopting a feminist standpoint interpretation of CCT, our study highlights the ways in which the complexities of context shape Lebanese female professionals' career constructions.

The benefit of such a hybrid interpretation rests with an explicit analytic broadening of the kinds of contextual influences considered. The consideration moves *from* a focus on individualized experiences to one that considers the potential contextual constraints tied to the collective experience of historical and sociopolitical oppression. Through this framework, therefore, we were able to tease apart the differential influence of contextual experiences across the domains of CCT (i.e., the what, how, and why), and to demonstrate the ways in which career constructions are not always a matter of individual choice, but are often necessarily shaped by *situatedness*. Despite the richness of our empirical data, a limitation of this research is that we were only able to showcase a few narratives out of the 40 analyzed in this study. However, in adopting our qualitative method, our claim was not to generalize results, but rather draw critical insights about the experiences of context.

As will be further fleshed out next, we believe that these findings are significant in a number of ways and have specific implications for the gender, work, and organization readership. In what follows, we first elaborate on the benefit of an interdisciplinary analytic lens that captures various degrees of *situatedness*. We argue that these varying degrees are important because they provide a nuanced understanding of the patterns of women's career

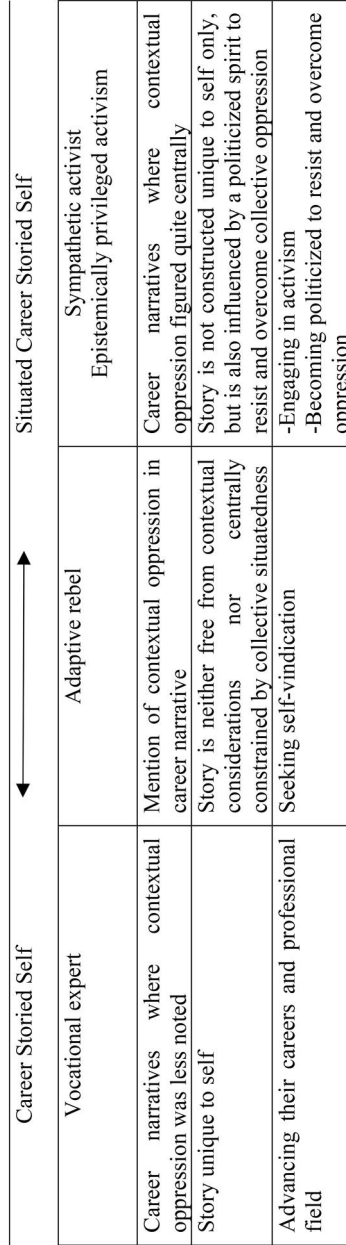


FIGURE 2 Continuum of the situatedness of the career storied self

construction, which was not possible through a traditional CCT lens alone. Building on that, we further argue that our second contribution lies in showing the value of centralizing contextual factors in career development theories more broadly. Throughout the discussion of the two points, we propose possible areas of future research. Finally, we conclude with a reflection on our personal positionality vis-à-vis this work and our ultimate aim in undertaking such research.

### 3.1 | Situatedness and our interdisciplinary analytic lens

The current study highlights the benefit in theorizing career constructions as *situated*, and therefore, as necessarily shaped by contextual complexities. The central question of our study explored the ways in which the career constructions of our sample of 40 Lebanese female professionals were shaped by contextual complexities specifically. Our results revealed three patterns; each differentiated by the extent to which these complexities were pivotal within the construction of the *career storied self*. Overall, our results revealed, as noted in Figure 2, a continuum of sorts ranging from very little mention of contextual factors of oppression to a centralization of such factors. These various patterns show how women in our sample make sense of contextual influences and how patterns of meaning making may vary between the women. Taken together, the three very different patterns of career construction evidence the differential interpretative processes through which women can adapt to contextual factors, and through which they tell about the projects that occupy them in their work life and the themes and that provide direction for their future work (Savickas, 2012). There are key benefits that derive from exploring the situatedness of career narratives in this way.

First, for career counselors, considerations of situatedness necessitates reflection on sociopolitical (and oppressive) systems. There is a growing body of research that centralizes such reflections such as can be found in work on feminist models of career counseling (e.g., Byars-Winston & Rogers, 2019; Peila-Shuster & Hines, 2019; Popadiuk, 2015; Sosulski, Marya, Buchanan, & Donnell, 2010). Future research could further explore feminist perspectives both in terms of theoretical grounding as was the case in the current paper, as well as methodologically. In the case of the latter, the work of Sosulski, Buchanan, and Donnell (2010) would be helpful as a starting point, calling for researchers to collaborate more closely with participants in the analysis and amplification of the subjectivity and agency in the actual research process itself.

Second, the hybrid lens highlights the importance of acknowledging the different identity characteristics of the women themselves. Not all Lebanese women are the same in terms of identity and demographic characteristics, and should therefore not be treated as such. This fact calls for a greater integration of an intersectional lens in approaching the study of career narratives and ultimate career patterns. The recurring tendency to view the region and its people as homogenous is equally applicable to both local and international researchers. There is a dire need, therefore, to apply an intersectional lens to conduct further research on the region and to tease out the ways in which class, religion, refugee status, geography, and so forth, shape the experiences at work and individual's career constructions. In the context of the greater Middle East, for example, this raises intersectional questions about socioeconomic privilege like those Forbes women described in the opening paragraph—in what ways are some Arab women privileged, while others less so? This is an important question that was raised early on by one of our anonymous reviewers, and it is one that has received little attention in research on women at work in the region. Instead, the body of related research in management and organizational studies to date has focused on the patriarchal oppression of Arab women as a group, ignoring intersectional differences of Arab women. Our analysis calls for future researchers to focus on teasing apart these intersectional differences. Are there parallels between “sympathetic activism” and the “white feminism” criticized by black feminists (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989) and third world feminists (C. T. Mohanty, 1984)? More work to unpack the parallels and differences is needed in future research.

Third, our results suggest that the construction of our sample of women's career narratives, and therefore their career storied selves, are shaped not only by their individual choices, but also by the lack of choice tied to collective oppression (i.e., by being *situated collectively*). The focus on the collective was a characteristic of the narrative of our third group of women. This group of women brought meaning to their career stories through a focus beyond the boundaries of personal life and industry, and focused instead outward. These women seemed to be either driven to improve the lives of the underprivileged or oppressed through extending a helping hand (sympathetic activism), or driven by a deeper sense of responsibility to actively fight against the structures that perpetuate collective inequalities (epistemically privileged activism). The difference between these two groups of women is intimately tied to the ways in which they unpacked the meaning of context and correspondingly the way they constructed their activism. On one hand, the women whose stories were animated by the desire to help others made sense of context from a distance and could maintain a sense of neutrality for change. On the other hand, the women whose stories were animated by a desire to change hegemonic structures made sense of context through a difficult struggle toward achieving an intimate and personal awareness of oppression.

This latter group of women engaged in career-related activism that was both communal in nature and highly politicized. It is this politicization that is the defining difference between the two patterns of career construction, only possible through a meaning making process that is intimately situated and epistemically privileged. By acknowledging the situatedness of career construction for the second subgroup of women (i.e., epistemically privileged activists), we are brought to further reflect on the benefit of FST generally. Here, the understanding of the contextual influences shaping women's career constructions are deeply rooted in collective histories and in the macrolevel geopolitical complexities of oppression (P. H. Collins, 1990). This understanding leads these women to try to make sense of the complex and entrenched political and social power dynamics as they build their career stories.

Relatedly, more work is also needed around the idea of situatedness and epistemic privilege as it applies to the construction of career narratives of Lebanese professional women. In the current paper, we have tried to bring value by adopting a feminist standpoint lens; however, other critical perspectives may also be appropriate and useful in this regard. For example, the work of LaPointe (2010) on positioning identity and of Cohen (2006) who draws from Williams's (1977) analysis of cultural processes may be useful in this regard. The work of Paulo Freire (2000) may also be helpful. Freire (2000) observed that as oppressed people think about and understand their social conditions, they develop views of themselves in relation to society. That is, as their thinking about social structures becomes more nuanced and reflective, oppressed people become more critically conscious and less constrained by their social conditions and, in turn, develop the agency and desire to change them and determine their own paths.

### 3.1.1 | Centralizing contextual factors in career development theories

We have demonstrated that the way a person makes sense of her context necessarily shapes her career construction, and ultimately her career trajectory. Grounded in the perspective that career stories are part of the "active process of career making" where "individuals selectively highlight particular experiences to produce a narrative truth by which they live" (Savickas, 2005, p. 43), we believe that our hybrid analytic lens and our commensurate findings are useful because they highlight the significance of context and suggest that future research on career construction adopt similar methodology to better trace contextual influences. Our hybrid analytic lens allows us to capture the macrocontextual influence on career construction that we believe, along with M. Watson (2013), is a necessary development for the internationalization of career research. In fact, persistent, criticism of established career theory has called for such contextual consideration in order to move the research beyond the limitations of being both culturally bound and contextually blind (Stead &

Watson, 2006). Beyond our contribution to CCT, our findings also shed light on the significance of oppressive contexts to understand different issues related to career development. M. Watson (2009, 2013) highlights the need to engage in future research on the link between macrosystemic oppressive factors and individual career development. Our study is one of the few studied to explore this link and to illustrate the various ways women construct their careers in such harsh contexts and how women make meaning of their careers within multiple layers of challenge. Future research would do well to explore different negative aspects of context and to acknowledge the importance of contextual diversity. That is, future work could attempt to explore the differential importance of societal, economic, and environmental structures that pose challenging constraints on career development. Teasing out, for example, the impact of patriarchal constraints, feudal and sectarian political connections, and/or sociopolitical instability and war. Additionally, future research could further delve into the experiences of specific critical incidents sexism, discrimination, sexual harassment, and other such instances and look at the influence on the different domains of career construction.

### 3.2 | Reflexive conclusion

In conclusion, our study highlights the value of understanding career constructions from a feminist standpoint. Such a standpoint has its roots in critical theory, which aims to ultimately empower the oppressed. This is significant to us on the personal level and leads us to reflect specifically on our own positionality, and therefore, on our own beliefs and interests in undertaking this research project. As two Lebanese, middle-class, academic women, this research was of great interest to us personally and served as a conduit for our own reflexive practice. Through all phases of this project—from data collection, analysis, and interpretation—there was an ongoing personal sense of consciousness raising where we learned, debated, and reflected together on how the knowledge and the process of knowing brought us closer to understanding our own career experiences as individuals as well as Arab women in the academy. The process of conducting this research therefore led us to interrogate where we stand with regards to our socially situated working lives and to our privileged position as researchers. This led us to better appreciate the current and past power dynamics that shaped different aspects of our careers as individuals and as coauthors. It also brought us to recognize that our engagement in this kind of research very much stemmed for our personal commitment to overcoming patriarchal biases and the oppressive structures we experience in our daily lives. This reflexivity, coupled with the process of carrying out this project highlighted the value of this work for us as researchers and as professional women. It also highlighted the value of a feminist standpoint as an immeasurably tool in reflective practice, helping us, as argued by Harding (2004), to not only link our research activities to personal reflections but also to link our personal to our political agenda of fighting to oppose oppression in our community.

Finally, we would be amiss not to reflect on the unfolding of the contextual hardships faced by the current realities of Lebanon. During our writing of the final drafts of this manuscript, the political, economic, and safety parameters of Lebanon have taken a severe turn for the worse. Indeed, 2020 has brought upheaval, political uprisings, economic collapse, Covid-19 pandemic, and the destruction of the country's capital with the August 4th Beirut Explosion. These unfolding events highlight the potential of undertaking more longitudinal examinations of career constructions. Against this backdrop, future research may want to track the changes in the themes and plots of these women with particular attention to 'the how' in relation to resilience and grit, and relatedly, to 'the why' if their career patterns continue along the same trajectory.

Relatedly, it would be interesting to explore when activists give up and/or what maintains a forward trajectory. Further research could also explore instances of burnout for the third group, and the ways in which burnout figures into their narrative, particularly when the vulnerability of the average Lebanese has increased exponentially in the current climate. What is the impact of the multiple crises, ongoing layers of crises on the interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals construct their situated storied self? What is

the impact of the multiple crises on their Vocational Personality or the articulation of goals? What is its impact on Career Adaptability or how the person goes about directing their adaptive career-related behaviors by addressing the obstacles faced in their daily life (when do they exit or give up)? Finally, do contextual hardships kill the spirit that animates the career storied self or does it fuel it further? In closing, we end with a quote from the American Novelists Jodi Picoult, a quote that we chose to believe in—"The human capacity for burden is like bamboo - far more flexible than you'd ever believe at first glance."

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not conflict of interests to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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**Fida Afouni** is an Associate Professor of Human Resource Management at the Olayan School of Business, American University of Beirut, Lebanon. She is also the convenor of the Management, Marketing, and Entrepreneurship track at OSB. She obtained her PhD degree in Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations from Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University and was the recipient of the Sharjah award for the best doctoral thesis in administrative sciences in the Arab world for the year 2005. Her current research focuses on the interplay of HRM, careers, and gender in the Arab Middle East with a particular interest in critically examining Talent Management practices in the region, HR policies in support of women's career development, as well as individuals' chosen career patterns and conceptualizations of career success. Her research agenda aims to lead to better understanding HRM/TM realities in the Middle East, to contribute to gender mainstreaming, and to shape policy at the national and organizational level to improve the quality of life of people in the region. Her publications have appeared in several outlets, the most recent being in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Human Resource Management Journal*, *Business Research Quarterly*, *Career Development International*, and the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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