The formative role of contextual hardships in women's career calling
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ABSTRACT
The current study explores the relationship between contextual hardships and women's career calling. We examine how the formation of career calling drive is linked to how an individual perceives and affectively reacts to forms of oppression within and across institutional subsystems. In conceptualizing career calling formation, we attempt to broaden our understanding of this concept to include external and negative contextual factors. Our core argument holds that the perception and experience of contextual hardships play a key role in the formation of career calling. Based on 20 in-depth qualitative interviews with successful women in Lebanon whose work fits the scholarly definition of career calling, our findings show that these women's career narratives are constructed in close relation to perceptions of oppression (i.e., violence, marginalization, powerlessness, exploitation and cultural imperialism) experienced across the political, financial, education and labor, and culture subsystems. Taken together, our main findings demonstrate that experiences of negative and external contextual hardship elicit affective responses that foster a career calling drive. Our findings help bridge the neoclassical and modern approaches to career calling by showing the important role that external sources can play in driving the internal formation of career calling.

1. Introduction

When the Arab feminist scholar and medical doctor Nawal El-Saadawi was asked, “What would you say to a woman in this country who assumes she is no longer oppressed, who believes women’s liberation has been achieved?”, she responded: “Well I would think she is blind. Like many people who are blind to gender problems, to class problems, to international problems. She's blind to what's happening to her. When you live in a world that is very unjust, you have to be a dissident” (McMillan, 1999). This quote captures El Saadawi's call to be cognizant of and fight against the harsh contextual realities that exist in her home country Egypt. Indeed, widely read, discussed, and debated for decades by citizens, activists, and feminist scholars across the Arab world, many of her writings are critical depictions of the multiple intersecting socioeconomic, religious, and political forces oppressing women and are a rallying call to women not to acquiesce but to strive for better futures for themselves and their communities.

Many researchers who focus on studying women’s careers and the harsh realities of the Arab world examine a number of interrelated elements, including localized patriarchal social contracts (Moghadam, 2004; Sidani, 2018) and other barriers that have been used to explain the region persistently ranking lowest in the world in female labor force participation rates (World Economic Forum, 2016). Further examination of many countries in the region reveals a series of harsh National Business Systems with restricted
economic opportunities (Kang & Moon, 2012; Karam & Jamali, 2017; Whitley, 1999) and multiple oppressive forces (Young, 2005) manifested in different forms, such as sectarian politics and clientelism (Geha, 2016), protracted armed conflict (Karam & Jamali, 2013), corrupt systems (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011), displacement (UNHCR, 2015), legalized gender discrimination (Afouni, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2015), and unfriendly employment systems that favor men (Metcalfe, 2008). Despite being in such restrictive environments, however, many Arab women like El Saadawi herself thrive vocationally and experience a drive to pursue career paths in a range of meaningful ways. Admired by many in their communities as role models, they passionately build their careers as a way of engaging directly against the oppressive obstacles and negative forces that stand in their way.

Against this backdrop, we explore the connection between women's perceptions and experiences of contextual hardships and the formation of their career calling. We are interested in whether the perceptions of and affective reactions to harsh contextual obstacles and forces can feed, at least in part, a sense of career calling for some women. This type of question shifts the framing of our work from trying to understand how women develop a career calling “despite the punitive environment”, to how women develop a career calling in response to it. Could it be that for some women such harsh contextual hardships actually animate an individual to a meaningful career pursuit or what some researchers have called a particular career calling (Davidson & Caddell, 1994; Wrzesniewski, 2003)?

Career calling as a concept, although only emerging over the last few decades, has been defined in different ways, with some commonalities and some differences. Looking at similarities, many definitions suggest that career calling can be understood as a pathway through which meaningful work is expressed (Dik & Shimizu, 2018), and through which a sense of both personal and social significance is derived (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). As for the differences, one important conceptual distinction can be drawn between the neoclassical (e.g. Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009) and the modern (e.g. Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011) definition of career calling. While both hold meaning and purpose as core elements of career calling, a major point of disagreement has to do with the actual source of the calling itself (Duffy & Dik, 2013). Those holding a more neoclassical definition view the source of calling as external to the person and often related to a transcendent “caller” (e.g., God, salient social needs, a family legacy) that motivates a desire to fulfill one’s destiny or prosocial duty (Dik & Duffy, 2009). In contrast, researchers holding modern definitions view calling as more individually-driven, emphasizing self-actualization, personal fulfillment, and passion (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011), and therefore, reflecting a person's psychological approach to work regardless of context (Dik & Duffy, 2015).

In this article and in the context of extreme contextual hardships, we challenge the emphasis on internal drive found in modern definitions, while simultaneously also expanding the types of external sources considered in neoclassical approaches. In doing this, we attempt to bridge the two and advance a more hybridized perspective exploring how external and negative contextual factors drive a person’s career calling. Based on this, our main research question is: “How do women perceive and affectively react to contextual hardships, and how do these, in turn, shape the formation of their career calling?”

Due to the fact that we knew little about career calling formation in harsh contexts when we began this study, we adopted the Gioia Method (Corley & Gioia, 2004) which allowed us to combine inductive, qualitative, interpretive techniques. Using this method we examine the processes by which the women in our sample affectively react to the experience of contextual hardship and how this, in turn, shapes the formation of their career calling. This is important, because while some authors have addressed how individuals react to hardships while pursuing a calling (e.g. Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Mitra &Buzzanell, 2017; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017), less is known about how the experience of contextual hardships can drive career calling formation specifically (Duffy, Bott, Allan, Torrey, & Dik, 2012).

Our study contributes to the scholarly conversation on career calling formation by contrasting the view that contextual hardships limit career calling with the view that these hardships play a critical role in shaping a career calling. Our key findings suggest that affective reactions to external and negative contextual factors can work to drive a person’s internal sense of career calling. In other words, hardship can inspire a career calling. In the section that follows, we further flesh out the core dimensions of career calling by providing a brief overview of differing conceptualizations. We then review the literature on career calling formation, with a focus on contextual hardships, affective responses, and gender.

2. Existing conceptualizations of career calling

Recent publications provide fresh insights on career calling conceptualizations. For example, Dik and Shimizu (2018) have identified the six most cited papers in this literature and the corresponding commonalities and differences among them. The authors place neoclassical and modern approaches to calling at either end of a continuum, one end of which emphasizes embracing one’s calling as a duty to society, and the second, alternatively, emphasizes a focus on “duty to the self” (Baumeister, 1991: 43) and the importance of “self-knowledge, identity, self-fulfillment, and the pursuit of (personal) happiness” (Novak, 1996: 39). An example of this neoclassical formulation is Dik and Duffy’s (2009) definition of calling which asserts that it is “a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation” (p. 427). According to the neoclassical approach, calling is motivated by a prosocial desire to use one’s gifts toward positive societal impact, often originating from an external or transcendent caller (e.g., God, salient social needs, a family legacy) or a sense of destiny.

Alternatively, the modern career calling approach is exemplified by Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas’s (2011) definition of calling. They define calling as “a consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain” (p.1005). Similarly, Hall and Chandler (2005) characterize a person’s career calling as reflecting “a generalized form of psychological engagement with the meaning of one’s career work” sometimes driven by “a strong sense of inner direction—work that would contribute to a better world” (p. 160). Researchers employing modern definitions tend to view calling as having shifted away from its religious roots, reformulating it as a highly
personal, meaningful, intrinsically motivated approach to work (Dik & Shimizu, 2018). From this perspective, although individuals living a career calling may also espouse “the belief that the work contributes to the greater good” (Wrzesniewski, 2003: 301), this belief is more an added benefit than a duty (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Following their brief overview of highly cited definitions, Dik and Shimizu (2018) highlight that a challenge for researchers concerns the messy conceptual landscape where clear differences exist in what scholars consider the core features of a calling. Furthermore, Duffy, Autin, England, Douglass, and Gensmer (2018) note that another challenge concerns the career calling theoretical frameworks that tend not to thoroughly incorporate contextual variables.

In this paper, we attempt to begin to address these challenges with efforts to bring contextual considerations into our examination of career calling formation. In our work we adopt Dik and Duffy’s (2009) three-part conceptualization of career calling, while acknowledging that the first component (i.e., how individuals find a calling) needs more conceptual work (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Duffy, Douglass, Autin, & Allan, 2014). Indeed, recent publications on career calling reiterate the need to better explore the sources of calling and the potential influence of external factors (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Duffy et al., 2014). The examination of sources and the influence of external factors have been widely overlooked and represent a research domain that needs to catch up with reality (Duffy & Dik, 2009).

3. How career calling forms

Similar to the need for research on context and career calling, more research is also needed on how context shapes the formation of career calling. In the literature to date, formation is not widely researched; more examination is devoted to the outcomes of career calling (Duffy et al., 2012). However, researchers are increasingly trying to bring more attention to the qualitative complexities of how career calling forms and to the contextual factors that shape the formation process (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Duffy et al., 2014). The paucity of research in this area leaves many questions about formation open for discussion and debate. For example, as noted earlier, a salient question concerns whether calling formation originates from an internal (modern approach) or external (neo-classical approach) source (Duffy & Dik, 2009). Examples of the latter have usually included both motivators (e.g., responding to the needs in society) and constraints (e.g., facing discrimination because of racism or sexism) with researchers suggesting that the line between what serves as a motivator or a constraint is not always so clear-cut (Duffy & Dik, 2009).

A second formation-related question asks “whether one finds a calling” or “whether the calling finds the person”. Elangovan, Pinder, and McLean (2010) ask whether, in fact, a calling is somehow “out there” in an ontological sense, or whether the existence of a calling somehow becomes apparent to the individual under certain circumstances. A common resolution in the literature suggests that people engage in a search for calling and that this is somewhat of deliberate search process, where the motivation to find initiates or maintains the search for one’s calling (Elangovan et al., 2010; Frankl, 1984).

Regardless of how calling is found and whether the search is prompted by positive curiosity, a growing sense of dissatisfaction, a critical event, or religiousness, it seems necessary for the individual to be compelled to seek work as a means toward personal fulfillment or toward positive impact on society (Elangovan et al., 2010). Frankl (1984) highlights a person’s sense of existential frustration or emptiness that is often a precursor to a longing to find a more meaningful career. There is some evidence to suggest a common tendency for people with a calling to have felt compelled to make a change in a context of difficulty, to overcome a sense of existential frustration in their life circumstance, and/or as a reaction to a critical event that jolts one’s perspective (Elangovan et al., 2010; Frankl, 1984). These forms of difficult circumstances or contextual hardships seem to play an important role in eliciting affective responses to specific hardships in the process of calling formation. In what follows, we begin by providing two useful frameworks to help structure the way we think about contextual hardships. We then discuss some of the career calling literature that explores the potential affective responses to such contextual hardships.

3.1. Types of contextual hardships and the manifestations of multiple forms of oppression

The career realities for women in the Arab Middle East are harsh and complex, with myriad forces contributing to many barriers to and constraints on their engagement in the workplace. Teasing apart these contextual hardships can prove difficult as the intersections between the various negative contextual forces are often widespread and omnipresent. Our aim in this section is to draw attention to two frameworks that are helpful in dissecting the complexities of the hardships experienced in the context under study. As will be further detailed below, the identification of theoretical work that can help us make sense of contextual hardships is particularly important once the initial inductive reading is complete. The frameworks we found most helpful include: (1) National Business Systems (NBS; Whitley, 1999) and (2) Five Faces of Oppression (Young, 2005). Each will be briefly discussed in turn.

Whitley’s (1999) NBS approach is useful to better delineate the varied and interconnected forces forming the complex contextual hardships within which women find themselves embedded. In its original formulation, this approach was used in business and management studies to explore the differing contexts within which businesses operate and employees work. This approach tended to pay particular attention to “the role of states; the nature of financial systems; skill development and control systems; and trust and authority relationships” (Whitley, 1999, p. 48). Furthermore, Whitley (1999) asserts that the NBS and its related components are historically grown and interdependent, and that they foundationally shape business operations, strategies, structures, technologies, and employment relations. With time, this approach has evolved and is used today by researchers to explore institutions at the organizational and societal levels, thereby drawing attention to the contextual subsystems within which organizations and employees function (Casper & Whitley, 2004; Redding & Witt, 2007).

Although early work using the NBS approach often assumed efficient and coherent systems, the global reality is that national
economic performance is often inefficient and incoherent (Kang & Moon, 2012; Wood & Frynas, 2006). Indeed, more and more researchers are exploring NBS-related components and dynamics beyond just those tied to coordinated and liberal market systems with coherent governance systems (Witt et al., 2018). Instead, we see a rise of research capturing the dynamics and characteristics of business systems from harsher national contexts with inefficient, turbulent or other peculiarities (e.g., Jamali, Karam, Yin, & Soundararajan, 2017; Kang & Moon, 2012; Wood & Frynas, 2006).

Different authors have highlighted numerous NBS subsystems (Witt & Redding, 2013), the most common of which are the political, financial, education and labor, and cultural domains (Matten & Moon, 2008). In the current paper, therefore, we found the NBS approach to be useful in helping us make sense of the emerging themes describing the experience of contextual hardships and to help us organize the way we think about them. However, this type of framework is not sufficient for understanding the impact on each individual woman. To capture how contextual hardships are actually experienced by a single woman in her day-to-day life, we felt that a complementary, more psycho-sociological approach is also needed. In this regard, we adopt the Five Faces of Oppression framework, in which feminist scholar Iris Young (2005) undertakes a theorization of oppression and the conditions that immobilize or diminish individuals within a particular group (e.g., women). In this way, and adopting a feminist lens of justice and power-differentials, the notion of oppression helps describe how injustices and discrimination are experienced.

Young (2005) asserts that oppression can be experienced in five forms: Exploitation (i.e., the act of using people's labors to produce profit while not compensating them fairly); Marginalization (i.e., the act of exclusion, relegating or confining a group of people to a lower social standing or outer limit or edge of society), Powerlessness (i.e., being dominated by the ruling class where the dominated group are disrespected, inhibited from developing their capacities, and precluded from making significant decisions that impact them); Cultural Imperialism (i.e., the act of taking the ruling class and establishing it as the valued norm); and Violence (i.e., acts intended to harm, harass, damage, humiliate or destroy the person or group). Each of these faces of oppression captures a nuanced manifestation of oppressive social structures and practices – the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society and people – weighing down on individual experiences.

Young (2005) further highlights that different oppressive forces “cut across individual lives in a multiplicity of ways that can entail privilege and oppression for the same person in different respects” (p. 7). The experience of oppression by the individual is a matter of personal and group identification. Young (2005) argues further that individuals (individual persons, as constituted partly by their group affinities and relations) experience oppression in varied and complex ways (p. 13). Part of this experience of oppression involves their own affiliated affective reactions, such as anger, resentment, grievance, outrage (Thompson, 2006), loss and melancholy (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003), and many other more positive and constructive responses that will be fleshed out further below.

Taken together the forms of oppression serve as the reality of contextual hardships forming the systematic constraints faced. Young (2005) argues that these five faces of oppression are systematically reproduced across political, financial, education and labor, and cultural subsystems. In summary and considered together, the NBS framework and Young’s five faces of oppression provide a general conceptual landscape to help us theoretically interpret women’s experiences of contextual hardships.

3.2. Contextual hardships eliciting affective responses and career calling drive

Affective responses are often distinguished from cognitive and behavioral processes, where the former tends to describe and capture feelings and emotions elicited in reaction to a stimulus such as feedback or a work experience (Iliès, Judge, & Wagner, 2010). Wyer, Clore, and Isbell (1999) define affective responses as subjective reactions that a person experiences at a given point in time usually elicited by perceptions of one’s immediate environment or by thoughts about the past of future events. Affective reactions are frequently elicited by cognitions and provide the basis for assigning evaluative meaning in ways that shape behavior (Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986). Some researchers argue that affective responses can be distinctly and separately identified (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Oatley, 1992), Oatley (1992), for example, developed a basic categorization including: happiness, fear, anger, sadness, and shame. When individuals experience affective responses, they are often motivated to not only understand the cause but to also take actions that help them cope (Iliès, Judge, & Wagner, 2010).

This motivation to take action has been previously examined in the work of feminist psychologists exploring the psychological and behavioral patterns of female activists. For example, the early work of Miller (1986) explores the thoughts, feelings and actions associated with being relatively subordinate in a hierarchical system, and with the psycho-affective processes through which some of these women were motivated to take steps toward social change and liberation. Other similar powerful examples exist in the career literature specifically. For example, the work of Wrzesniewski (2002) explores how affective responses to contextual hardships often lead to a desire for meaningful careers that have social impact. In examining the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, this author demonstrates how harsh contexts can work to elicit affective responses leading to a desire for more meaning in their careers and the type of career paths pursued. She described the attack experience as jolting many individuals to “feel a desire to reach out and to give aid to others” and to shift their career directions (Wrzesniewski, 2002: 231). She further notes that:

“The calling orientation has gained many subscribers after the terrorist attacks. The examples offered earlier of career changes after September 11 reflect a desire to spend one’s life doing meaningful, fulfilling work that contributes to the world in a more direct way. Not surprisingly, the chosen occupations emphasize service to others in ways that make the world a better place” (p. 233)

Mapping the impact of contextual hardships on a person’s affective responses and, in turn, career related behavior is a much-needed area of research to further unpack the complexities of the link between context and calling formation. Schabram and Maitlis (2017) is a recent example of this kind of work where they investigate the different affective responses that employees develop following the challenges they encounter while pursuing their calling. In line with Hall and Chandler (2005), Schabram and Maitlis's
(2017) study suggests the importance of understanding the connections between hardships and the elicited affective responses in pushing individuals to adopt a particular path, thereby shaping how people continue to pursue the career calling. Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) undertake similar research examining how individuals react to hardships and negotiate the related challenges at work while pursuing a calling. Participants in their study derived a sense of meaningfulness not merely from the pleasurable or exciting aspects of their jobs, but also from instances that unsettled them, annoyed or angered them, and/or challenged them to think creatively (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Similarly, Bunderson and Thompson’s (2009) study on zookeepers also points to a fundamental drive to persevere in harsh work conditions and to sacrifice money, time, and physical well-being for their calling.

Relatedly, Dik and Duffy (2009:429) suggest that the contextual hardships generally experienced in underprivileged communities may amplify an individual's sense of career calling. Similarly, Hall and Chandler (2005) argue that among unemployed participants from diverse backgrounds, the experienced constraints might actually serve as a motivation for self-exploration and experimentation in different types of jobs and careers. In fact, several unemployed participants in their study reported that it was not until their resources ran out and they 'reached bottom,' that they were able to discern what they described as their true calling. There was a sense among participants that having resources may in some cases be a barrier to discovering a calling, as resources tend to remove the motivation to self-explore and to try out different kinds of work (Hall & Chandler, 2005). The authors further argue that a position of privilege can insulate the person from having to take work seriously, so that s/he never does the self-exploration and trial work activities necessary to discern her/his calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005).

The notion of privilege and its underlying relationship with power relates fundamentally to the exclusionary barriers (e.g., sexism, glass ceiling effects) experienced by women in the labor market. These sorts of barriers perpetuating disadvantage and precluding some women from accessing the job market and career opportunities may actually serve to augment the sense of meaningfulness and purpose in one's career generally (e.g., Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002). Barnett and Hyde (2001) and Halpern (2005) argued that some women from accessing the job market and career opportunities may actually serve to augment the sense of meaningfulness and a sense of purpose outside of traditional gender roles. Extending this line of argument to our focus on women in the Arab Middle East, we argue that difficult contextual realities – poverty, war, discriminatory policies, patriarchal gender norms, sociopolitical instability – may also serve a facilitative role for career calling for our sample of women. Next, we elaborate this further by focusing on women's careers, patriarchal norms, and the link between related contextual hardships and career calling formation.

3.3. Women, oppression and the formation of career calling

While research on women’s career calling exists, most of this work is driven by exploring differences between men and women as biological difference categories (e.g., Longman, Dahlvig, Wikkerink, Cunningham, & O'Connor, 2011; Sellers, Thomas, Batts, & Ostman, 2005), as opposed to exploring career calling as a potentially gendered sociocultural phenomenon. We see the work of Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2015) as highly relevant to our approach in the current manuscript as the authors begin to question the assumptions underlying contemporary discourse of career calling, questioning assumptions about inequality, agency, and control. Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2015) assert that the historical invocations of calling often presume and reproduce dominant interests, and simultaneously perpetuate dynamics of domination and control because the calling sources are assumed to be external to the person being called. From this perspective therefore, and in the current paper, we argue that the experience of contextual hardships can play a formative role in career calling to regain control over one’s life, and attempt to reduce experienced inequalities. In this way, calling in the context of hardships may play a self-initiated and liberating role, thereby altering the preconceived idea that calling is a privileged experience, available to some but not to others (Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008).

Furthermore, from this critical perspective we are also cognizant of broader streams of career literature that approach intersections of gender and work more from a perspective of exploring power dynamics, inequities and greater macro- and meso-structural realities (e.g., Crawford & Unger, 2004). Any exploration of a woman’s career (or career calling) should attempt to account for her personal narrative to understand how she herself perceives her career calling to have emerged in relation to her perceptions of and reaction to contextual specificities. Indeed, this notion of interaction between person-environment is an important pretext for other streams of career research that adopt gendered or feminist lenses of analysis (e.g., Buzzanell, Long, Anderson, Kokini, & Batra, 2015; Lewis & Simpson, 2015), and that move beyond research that focuses on women as simply a participant demographic without unpacking context.

This distinction is important, because it pushes for an analytic lens that does not simply view gender as a binary biological category (male-female), but rather as a social process or social experience wherein one does or performs gender (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2010). Seen as such, studying women’s careers or the formation of career calling requires greater acknowledgement of the embedded nature of gender relations such that more attention is needed to how perceptions and reactions are imbued by forces stemming from the subsystems (i.e., political, financial, educational and labor, and cultural subsystems) surrounding the women under study. Taken together, the significance of our framing is that we bring context front and center, and provide a more nuanced consideration of it by focusing on hardships experienced as different forms of oppression across different subsystems of the NBS. Drawing on the perceptions of (i.e., form of oppression within a specific institutional subsystem) and reactions to (i.e., affective responses and career calling drive) external contextual hardships, allows us to further question the modern conceptualizations of career calling and interrogate its focus on internal-drive as noted in the introduction.

4. Methods

The research question that we aim to answer in the current study is: “How do women perceive and affectively react to contextual
hardships, and how do these, in turn, shape the formation of their career calling?” To answer this, we adopted the two-stage analytic process detailed by the Gioia Method (see Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). This method is inductive, interpretive, and iterative, with the aim of building emergent theory that gives voice to the interpretations of those living an experience (Corley & Gioia, 2004). This method allows for an understanding of the actual production of meanings and concepts used by social actors in real settings to emerge and to be further informed by pre-existing theoretical constructs (Rynes & Gephart, 2004). The iterative (back-and-forth) reading between the data and theory allows for insights to be drawn and a more holistic understanding to be established.

4.1. Research context

Our study focuses on women living and working in the Arab Middle Eastern Country of Lebanon. The long history of religious, sociopolitical and geopolitical turmoil, colored by traditional patriarchal dynamics and archaic paternalistic legislative frameworks make this country a particularly relevant context for an examination of women’s experiences of contextual hardships. Lebanon was ravaged by a multi-sectarian, multi-tribal civil war from 1975 to the early 1990s (Karam & Kwantes, 2011). These divisions are directly related to the system of political governance today in the country (World Bank, 2015) which is comprised of a multi-confessional system. Today, these divisions are still salient and appear to be increasing in light of the turbulent geopolitical situation in the Middle East more broadly, with rising tensions between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors, and between many other neighboring countries (Kerr, 2017). Surrounded by countries undergoing internal political violence, Lebanon’s internal demographics and stability is threatened by regional strife (Hout, 2016).

In such a fragile geopolitical context, the efforts of authorities and the international community have been focused on relief and infrastructure support, as opposed to on promoting gender rights and women’s empowerment. As a result, strategic efforts to advance women have been slow to progress, resulting in the continuation of structural constraints that carry the seeds of gender inequalities that are wide reaching and broad in many of the laws and regulations (USAID, 2012: 44). To illustrate this point, the World Economic Forum (2016) publishes two indices that serve to document patriarchal influences: The Global Gender Gap Index and the Gender Inequality Index. The first indicator places Lebanon well below the world median, ranking 135th out of 144 countries. These statistics suggest that when comparing the health/survival, education, economic opportunity, and political participation of men versus women, female citizens are clearly at a stark disadvantage. A closer examination of the dimensions included in these indices suggests that the gap is largely tied to economic and political participation (133rd/144 and 143rd/144, respectively). On the second indicator, where Lebanon places 83rd/159, the loss in human development is measured in terms of inequality in reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity. At the organizational level, the inequities in the career experiences of women versus men are stark and well documented (Afiouni, 2014; Afiouni & Karam, 2014; Karam & Afiouni, 2017).

4.2. Sample and data collection

We followed Lincoln and Guba’s (1986) guidelines for “purposeful sampling” in choosing our participants. The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). The selection criteria in our study included being female, coming from low-to-medium socioeconomic status, being born and raised in Lebanon, and not coming from wealthy, powerful or political family. We were also sure to sample women from different religious sects and confessions and from the six governorates of Lebanon. Based on this sampling strategy and the specified criteria, a general call for nominations was distributed online and through word of mouth, in collaboration with one of the United Nations agencies operating in Lebanon. Over 65 women were nominated by community members, of which 40 met our specified criteria and were interviewed. All interviews were digitally recorded, lasted up to 2 h, and were transcribed verbatim.

These transcriptions were then separately read by two independent researchers, and following Patton’s (1990) theory-based sampling strategy (i.e. selecting cases that manifest “theoretical constructs of interest” (p. 183)) we identified only those women whose work fits the scholarly definition of calling. During this process of sampling, the researchers read each question alone and highlighted specifically for statements representative of the career calling dimensions of purpose/meaning, pro-social orientations, and transcendental source (Dik & Duffy, 2009). The researchers met frequently to discuss the statements and potential categorization along the three dimensions, and to work through any disagreements. To be categorized as living out career calling, participants’ narratives needed to include references to all three dimensions listed above. At the end of this exercise, we found that 20 out of the 40 women in our original sample fit the adopted scholarly definition of calling and were retained for the remainder of the study. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of our final set of 20 participants.

Finally, from the 20 women’s narrative responses only a subset of questions were analyzed for the current study. These questions inquired about: biographical information; their personal career trajectories; the reason they chose their line of work; how easy or difficult it was for them to pursue their career; and how their experience of context has facilitated or impeded their career.

4.3. Data analysis

To build our data structure, we began our first stage of analysis by reading the transcriptions and extracting statements and constructs (open coding). These extracts were then grouped into categories that represented similar ideas, issues, or relationships, being careful to engage in constant comparison techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to triangulate comparative extracts from different participants. This helped us to discern the shared concepts and processes participants used in describing their careers. During this initial stage of analysis, we identified numerous 1st-order terms and concepts (Van Maanen, 1979).
Table 1
Demographic characteristics of women in our sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th># of children</th>
<th>Latest university degree</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Birth Mohafaza</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maysa</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>EMBA</td>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>Owner of a pharmaceutical company</td>
<td>Mount Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zalfa</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Founder and CEO</td>
<td>South Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samar</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Nutrition, Food Science, Marketing</td>
<td>Founder and CEO</td>
<td>South Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nura</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Journalism and Information Communication</td>
<td>Media manager</td>
<td>South Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
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<td>Jomana</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
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<td>Science teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taline</td>
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<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Bekaa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* BA = bachelor of arts; BS = bachelor of science; MBA = masters of business administration; MA = masters of arts; EMBA = executive masters of business administration; PhD = doctorate of philosophy; NA = not applicable.

Taken together, this initial analysis was thus fundamentally interpretive in its approach, and tapped into the interpretation and meaning systems of the interviewed women.

Next, we moved from 1st-order to 2nd-order axial coding (see Corley & Gioia, 2004) wherein we searched for relationships between and among these categories. Here, we not only explored narratives across the participants but also turned to the pre-existing literature for concepts and theories relating to gender, career calling, NBS, affective responses, and oppression. This is an integral part of 2nd-order coding. Indeed, Gioia et al. (2013) recommend that as part of 2nd-order analysis we ask ourselves whether the emergent themes point to theoretical concepts that might help describe or explain the phenomena under study. Such a step is particularly useful because it facilitates assembling codes into themes situated at a higher level of abstraction. These techniques were not linear, but instead were iterative, forming a “recursive process-oriented, analytic procedure” (Locke, 1996: 240) between our data and useful theory.

Here, therefore the 2nd-order coding moved to a more theoretical level (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and we found that some of the concepts relating to the National Business Systems (Kang & Moon, 2012; Whitley, 1999) and the Five Faces of Oppression (Young, 2005), as well as the literature on Affective Reactions (e.g., Moane, 2011; Wyer, Clore, & Isbell, 1999) were useful for better understanding the interaction and interrelationships between our emerging constructs. Such an iterative process simultaneously allows categories/subcategories to inductively emerge from the data while being theoretically driven. The final data structure summarizing the 1st-order concepts and 2nd-order themes is illustrated in Fig. 1. Taken together, these serve as the basis upon which we argue the link between contextual hardships, affective responses and career calling formation.

While the top half of Fig. 1 presents the breadth of oppressive contextual hardships, the bottom half presents the breadth of affective responses to these experienced hardships. The structure of the data from the first phase of analysis, presents a summative presentation of the women's narratives concerning their perceived forms of oppression that are generally experienced across different NBS subsystems in the first five rows, and their affective reactions in the last four rows of the figure. Taken together, the figure captures the experience of contextual hardships as forms of oppression (aggregate dimension) including violence, marginalization, powerlessness, exploitation and cultural imperialism (2nd-order themes). In addition to this, it also captures the experience of affective reactions (aggregate dimensions) to these oppressive hardships in the form of feeling aware, anger, anxiety and isolation (2nd-order themes).

Overall, our analysis involved multiple readings of the transcripts in a line-by-line fashion for each woman across all the questions analyzed. The two analyzers met frequently to discuss and reach consensus on the statements and on the potential ways to best capture the intended meanings ad to make sense of these. In a few cases, we had lengthy discussions and referred to the literature multiple times to understand various forms of contextual hardships and to decide which of the emerging sub-categories belong to which of the five faces of oppression, and in relation to what form of institutional subsystem.

To ensure trustworthiness of our findings, we adopted various strategies following Lincoln and Guba's (1986) guidelines. First, both reviewers had prolonged engagement with the transcripts to understand the phenomenon under study and engaged in an
iterative process and crosschecking of codes obtained to ensure credibility of our findings. We further engaged, to the extent possible in a thick description of the context in which women experienced hardships to ensure the transferability of our findings. Finally, we asked two of our peers who had sufficient knowledge about qualitative research to give us feedback on our findings (peer debriefing) to ensure dependability and confirmability of our findings. In what follows, we present the findings along the emergent framework with the aim of providing empirically driven and theoretically informed answer to our research question.

Fig. 1. Data structure.
5. Findings

We begin this section by describing the contextual hardships identified in the data analysis. As will be described in the next section, these hardships were experienced in the form of oppression as manifested within and across the various NBS subsystems. Although our data structure clearly specifies the 2nd-order themes as violence, marginalization, powerlessness, exploitation, and cultural imperialism, many of these hardships were experienced simultaneously within one or more specific subsystem. Therefore, to stay true to the narratives and the manner in which the forms of oppression are experienced as multiple and complex contextual hardships within the different subsystems, we decided to present the contextual hardships/forms of oppression along each of the subsystems in turn (see Fig. 2). We then present our findings regarding the affective reactions to these complex contextual hardships along the 2nd-order themes of Feeling Aware, Anger, Anxiety, and Isolation as shown in the second column and bottom half of data structure (see Fig. 1).

5.1. Perceived contextual hardships across the subsystems of the NBS

Taken holistically, our findings suggest that the women in our sample perceived facing a varied range of contextual hardships from exposure to one type of oppression (e.g. violence) in a single subsystem (e.g. cultural systems) to more complex experiences of
overlapping oppressions simultaneously (e.g., marginalization and cultural imperialism) across subsystems (e.g., education and labor systems, political systems). More specifically, our findings show that our participants perceive experiencing all five forms of oppression in the education and labor subsystem, four forms of oppression in the cultural system, and two forms in both the political and financial subsystems. In what follows, we illustrate how hardships are experienced within each subsystem and then move to illustrate the complexity of hardships across subsystems and faces of oppression.

5.1.1. Perceived contextual hardships in the education and labor subsystem

As shown under the education and labor subsystem box in Fig. 2, women described experiencing contextual hardships substantively in the education and labor subsystem in the form of all five faces of oppression, often simultaneously, thereby rendering their experience multifaceted and potentially omnipresent. For example, Marwa experienced marginalization early on in life due to patriarchal gender norms restricting her from following her vocational interests:

“I wanted to have a career in journalism but it was very hard because I am a woman. Back then, you cannot even imagine how hard it was for a woman to become a journalist. My parents had difficulty in accepting that I would become a journalist or even a sculptor. Perhaps if I was a guy, things would have been easier”

(Marwa)

She also recalls experiencing violence in the form of harassment early in her career:

“When I was 20 years old, I used to write for a magazine. It was very difficult at the time for a young woman to pursue this kind of career. What is even worse is the psychological aggression that makes you feel inferior. I was exposed to this type of aggression in the workplace”

(Marwa)

An example of experienced powerlessness is provided by Maysa who states: “I believe that being a female has caused me to start later in my career and my business than I could have if I was a male” (Maysa). This was augmented by perceived exploitation: “At one point of my life I felt underpaid as a woman” (Maysa). Similar experience of exploitation and powerlessness was experienced by Bissan who states: “When people see that I am a woman they refuse to talk to me. Or sometimes when I talk to other people or other women, I notice the discrimination in terms of salaries and working hours” (Bissan). Another example of exploitation is provided by Carol: “An international company called me from France and offered me a position. They told me that because I am a woman I cannot take a very high position so they offered to give me a high salary yet I would be working under the supervision of men” (Carol).

5.1.2. Perceived contextual hardships in the cultural subsystem

As shown under the cultural subsystem box in Fig. 2, contextual hardships in the cultural system are mostly experienced in the form of cultural imperialism vis-à-vis patriarchal societal and family norms. These women describe being subjected to dominant expectations about appropriate ways of being, which are dictated by patriarchal norms within family and society. An example of such cultural imperialism emerged from Taline’s narrative:

“In society where I live, there is a hierarchy and if you are a woman, it is difficult, especially when you are a young woman. It takes time and effort to show that you are worthy. In the Bekaa region, there were no role models that I could to strive to be like. Very few women would continue into a career. I had to endure many challenges such as my parents who supported me at first, but then started pressuring me and telling ‘that your sister is married, you should think of your future’. They did not believe that I was looking to and understanding my future well”

(Taline)

Referring to the cultural imperialism of patriarchal norms prevalent in society, Joumana illustrates how hard it is to live on her own as the norm as it deviated from the dominant cultural norm: “Another challenge is to live by myself, privacy on my own, in such society and cultural environment” (Joumana). A similar example illustrating such cultural imperialism is provided by Zalfa, who kept facing criticism when deviating from the dominant cultural norm:

“I went to many places even at this age to Africa; people de-motivated me and criticized me for going, although I believed in it, so I kept on going. I also faced this problem when I got divorced. The society is against getting divorces. I was a bit shy at the beginning when I went to social gatherings or to meet other ministers, I had to impress everyone from the moment I get in. A man does not have the inferiority proposed at him to overcome”

(Zalfa)

Similarly, Abla describes being exposed to similar cultural imperialism due to patriarchal societal norms:

“In the beginning, I would say my environment, my culture was a little a bit of a stressing factor in a sense that a girl working in this field is perceived to end up without a husband. You know the society has those thoughts and stresses that a woman should fulfill other roles in order to become accepted in a sense. Even my family members used to tell me that I shouldn’t work too much”

(Abla)

5.1.3. Perceived contextual hardships in the political subsystem

As shown under the political subsystem box in Fig. 2 perceptions of the experiences of contextual hardships in the political system were equally evident and often experienced as forms of cultural imperialism due to the dominant meanings of one sectarian/tribal
identity over others, and as forms of violence from the regional and civil war. Most of these women are referring to the civil war, which raged between sectarian and tribal groups in Lebanon for 30 years. The following statement from Zalfa also illustrates this intersection of oppressions: “It was challenging to open a transport company in a country with sectarian divisions of area and political parties, as well as a complicated political system (Zalfa).” Samar also refers to the experience of civil war violence and how this was unsafe: “What was also challenging, especially during the war, was that we used to go to our appointments late at night and drive in highly unstable conditions” (Samar).

Illustrating cultural imperialism due to tribal and sectarian identities, Joumana provides a vivid illustration: “At my job at this local NGO, one of the components is working in political issues and elections. And I was from a different sect. I was confronted by people who knew about my religion and wondered why I was in this position” (Joumana).

5.1.4. Perceived contextual hardships in the financial subsystem

Fewer women reported experiencing hardships in the financial subsystem with statements describing cultural imperialism and powerlessness (refer to the financial subsystem box in Fig. 2). For example, Farah recalls feeling powerlessness due to the risks of the unhealthy economic crisis: “I am one of the bread winners in my family. I contribute with a bigger chunk, but we are blessed in Lebanon with family solidarity which is the main reason behind the society being able to hold it together despite the economic crisis” (Farah). Abir also shared similar concerns: “I took a financial risk by opening my own office and giving away my high salary as an employee. During the 2006 war, everyone was afraid from losing his job” (Abir).

5.1.5. The experience of hardship across multiple subsystems

The narratives of 15 women in our sample referred to experienced hardships that cut across two or more subsystems, adding to the complexity and weight of such experiences. For example, Bissan recounts experiencing marginalization at work (i.e., in the education and labor subsystem) because of patriarchal restrictions on decision making positions. She states that: “Sometimes, because I am a woman, I am considered incapable of doing anything. They would say ‘Women are weak. What do you want to do? You can’t be a senior’. They start throwing words that have no purpose other than to drag you down” (Bissan). At the same time, Bissan also described witnessing the powerlessness of women generally in the cultural subsystem: “Every day I see someone not believing herself and living on the periphery of life because they don’t want to engage or they just don’t care. They are on the periphery because they are not fighters or do not have a clear vision” (Bissan). She also recalls when she was a kid how she witnessed gender discrimination due to the dominance of patriarchal societal norms. She states: “When I was a kid I saw enough. I faced enough discrimination from the society, which pushed me to think about that” (Bissan).

Jinane's narrative is also rich with experiences of multiple forms of oppression across various subsystems. For example, she experienced marginalization in the education and labor subsystem as her parents did not approve of her being an artist due to patriarchal gender norms:

“I remember my grandmother, a veiled and conservative woman, who was the life of weddings and events, she used to improvise, dance, do the “dabkeh”; if she was not present at events, they would fail. She used to adore me and take me with her from place to place. … When my father found out I was studying theatre he became very aggressive, I used to run away to my grandmother’s house. I told her what was going on between my father and I and she told me to hide somewhere close to her house so that when my father came he would not find me. When my father came looking for me she used to try to calm him down and tell him that she will find me and then send me home. After my father left she would whistle so I would know it is safe” (Jinane)

Coupled with such experiences of hardship, Jinane also experienced forms of cultural imperialism oppression in the cultural subsystem, due to the patriarchal norms in her family where she felt that they were denying her basic rights simply because she was a woman. “I have felt this discrimination in my extended family (among my aunts and uncles) where women’s rights are not taken seriously” (Jinane).

Jinane also faced cultural imperialism in the financial system where her pursuit of art was and continues to be undervalued. For her, working in the cultural and artistic domains put her in a precarious financial situation: “I consider myself still taking financial risks up until now. … I feel like I invest in culture and art more than what I get in return, which is why I have to train and teach to make money” (Jinane).

Another poignant example of the complexity of experienced contextual hardships is that of Nura. Her narrative captures how the various oppressive forces across the political, labor, cultural and financial subsystems weigh on her. Her narrative is rich with references to the political subsystem, where she speaks of cultural imperialism vis-à-vis cultural and tribal identity. When Nura speaks of latter, she refers to a highly politicized media landscape that she found challenging to navigate: “In Lebanon we are still learning how to become democratic. Media outlets are politicized and much more driven by politics than by social issues. That is a challenge for me” (Nura).

Nura’s narrative also makes reference to experiences of contextual hardship in the education and labor subsystem, in the form of cultural imperialism vis-à-vis sectarian identity. She didn’t feel comfortable joining a TV station because of its clear sectarian affiliation: “After graduation in 1991, There was [a TV channel] that was purely biased in favor of the [a particular militia and affiliated religious sect] which drove me away from working there” (Nura). Albeit not experienced directly, but rather observed, Nura also speaks about violence against women in the cultural subsystem:

“One of my main interests was women’s issues. During my work, I always focused on women… I covered women in Yemen, women in Iran,
crimes of honor in Jordan, women in Kuwait at that time the debate about the right to vote or not. So I was always interested in the topic of women's rights"

(Nura)

In the financial subsystem, she experienced also experience an undervaluing of her work as her job did not allow her to be financially sufficient:

“Did not make money out of [my TV show] and I am not saying that it was smart. When I worked on [my TV show], I depended on my salary from the channel; I was not paid for the show. I was starting, it was new, and I was excited”

(Nura)

5.2. Affective reactions to experienced contextual hardships and the rise of calling

After gaining an understanding of women’s perceptions of the contextual hardships, we now turn to the related affective reactions as shown in the bottom half of the data structure (Fig. 1). The extraction of the statements were grouped thematically as relating to one of four general affective response categories: Feeling aware (i.e. gaining awareness, feeling responsible to local community); Anger (i.e., anger/rebellion/indignation/rage/frustration); Anxiety (i.e. anxiety/worry/concern/stress); and Isolation (i.e. isolation/restiction/boredom). Coding for the affective responses was useful to help us better trace how perceived contextual hardships are ultimately linked to the career calling formation.

When examining the process of career calling formation, the link between affective reactions and career calling drive was more often described in the context of certain subsystems over others. In fact, among women in our sample, the affective reaction and calling drive seemed to be most frequently emerging as a response to contextual hardships manifested in the education and labor subsystem and in the political subsystem. Less frequent examples were given concerning the cultural and financial subsystems. Furthermore, and generally speaking, affective reactions were sometimes tied to the experience of multiple forms of oppression in multiple national subsystems, and women often displayed various affective reactions to this complex experience of contextual hardships. Feeling aware, anger and anxiety were the most frequently reported affective reactions, followed by isolation and many women reported more than one affective reaction. Regardless of the type and number of affective reactions reported by each woman, each were closely tied to the experience of contextual hardships in the form of different faces of oppression and across different NBS subsystems, and each were generative of career calling formation directed toward attenuating various faces of oppression witnessed or experienced. Next, we present illustrative quotes for each affective reactions, being careful to give more space to the most salient reactions (i.e., feeling aware, anger and anxiety), while also providing space to show how various reactions are sometimes felt in combination. Each will be discussed in turn.

5.2.1. Feeling aware

As noted in the sixth row of Fig. 1, the affective reaction theme of “Feeling Aware” was the broadest with a number of different manifestations in the narratives of our sample. Generally speaking, this theme included statements referring to gaining an awareness of surrounding oppressive circumstances of forces and recognizing/realizing and becoming more cognizant of the disadvantages facing them, their communities or other women. Many of the women described in addition to gaining awareness, a feeling or responsibility to make a change and to improve things for society. A good example illustrating gaining awareness and feeling responsible to local community can be found in Zalfa’s narrative, the founder and CEO of a successful transport company. She describes how hard it is to do business in times of the civil war, illustrating and awareness of the forces of cultural imperialism and its ties to sectarianism in the political subsystem:

“It was challenging to open a transport company in a country with sectarian divisions of area and political parties, as well as a complicated political system”

(Zalfa)

This experienced hardship elicited an affective reaction in the form of gaining awareness and feeling responsible to the local community, and a drive to engage in corporate social responsibility to address the needs of her country:

“I believe in this country, I believe that things can change. That’s why I am active in CSR not just with my company but also on a personal basis. I believe that our country needs a lot of work and so at least I want to try.

(Zalfa)

Nura’s narrative is also very telling. As a media manager and activist, her work focuses on telling the stories of the oppressed, mostly the displaced and women. Her narrative captures a sense of responsibility to the region coupled with her depictions of the sober realities of the harshness of war. Her narrative suggests a drive to make a positive change, despite her sense of anxiety and worry about the political situation in Lebanon and the broader region. Here, Nura’s affective reactions are complex, and her narrative refers to anxiety due to the war atrocities she is witnessing, in addition to a heightened sense of responsibility (i.e. feeling aware) to do something about it. Illustrating her anxiety coupled with the depiction of the harsh realities she states:

“I am so involved in covering the Syrian revolution. I engage with lots of activists, I see what's happening there, I follow the story very closely. I mean what's happening in Syria is affecting us here …. So, this constant anxiety worries me. And, I think this is a high price…. the highest price that I am paying for being a journalist. You never feel calm, even if there is nothing local that is worrying me. You find yourself
Nura further describes gaining awareness and developing a sense of calling drive:

“I don’t want to travel to the states, I don’t want to travel to Britain, it is of course better to live there, but I belong here. I like to work in our society, I like the stories that we have, I know we have hundreds of stories that are worth telling but we just need to tell it. And when you are unable to change the world directly, you feel that there is a small role of telling the story. My job as a journalist is to tell the story. Sometimes, it is hard to find people to support you in telling these stories. So you always have to fight and to convince them that this is a good story…make them believe”

(Jinane)

Jinane’s narrative provides another example to capture the feeling of gaining awareness following the experience of marginalization due to patriarchal gender norms in the education and labor subsystem, coupled with the experience of violence due to civil war tied to the political subsystem. On the latter, she states: “They used to say that Lebanon was the Switzerland of the Middle East but during the war the country was so fragile” (Jinane). When she realized that the country was so fragile, she felt more aware:

“At the time so many war incidents occurred that were very alarming and made me aware of the fake reality we live in. … During the Lebanese civil war I started searching for reasons behind this tragedy that was occurring and I started asking questions like “what is Lebanon?” and “what does it mean to be a Lebanese citizen?” I was in my second year at university when I began having all these questions and when I started to become aware of things I was previously ignorant of.”

(Jinane)

Jinane also reported feeling angry and felt the sense of urgency to find ways to channel her anger:

“During the war I had accumulated rage in my heart and I was looking for a way to channel my anger and what I was feeling.”

(Jinane)

These reactions of feeling aware coupled with anger led her to choose an artistic career. Jinane is also a writer and activist, her narratives describe how she channels her anger from the civil war into writing stories. She views art as a form of resistance and her sense of patriotism as leading her to refuse to leave the country and to become very active on the local sociopolitical scene, trying to make change happen through work:

“During the war I had accumulated rage in my heart and I was looking for a way to channel my anger and what I was feeling, so I started writing (stories, poetry, a journal). Through my socio-political work during the war, I managed to meet artists who used to fuse the Lebanese reality with their work, in the form of songs and theatrical experiments. So we used to meet in bomb shelters and transform them from their confined and bleak state into places of luminous nights of playing music, art, improvisation and scenes. …I refused to leave the country and I became very active the socio-political scene, attending meetings through which I would meet people and make change happen”

(Jinane)

5.2.2. Anger

As noted in the seventh row of Fig. 1, the “Anger” theme was comprised of affective reactions that represented a sense of frustration, rebellion, rage or wanting to fight against exclusion or oppression. The narrative of some of the women in our study described feeling frustrated by the limitations placed on them as women and actively counteracting these or channeling the negative feelings through various forms of resistance and rebellion. Whether coupled with other affective reactions such as feeling aware as reported by Jinane above, or whether felt on its own, the affective reactions captured in the anger-theme were also tied to the career calling drive for many women in our sample. Liliane for example felt the marginalization of women because of patriarchal restrictions on decision-making positions in the education and labor subsystems. She states: “In this country, unfortunately, they tell you that there is no glass ceiling but there is always a glass ceiling” (Liliane). She further describes her anger whenever she witnesses gender inequalities at work: “When there are gender inequalities, I cannot, I burst” (Liliane). Her narrative further denotes how this anger led her to specialize in gender studies at university and to later advocate for gender equality at work. She states: My Master’s thesis actually was about gender issues...I opened a page on Facebook that is about involving women in the government and in the public sector in high positions. I want to have 50% women representation in the parliament. And we have a lot of potential; there are lots of powerful women who are very well advanced in their career (Liliane).

Another example of Anger is present in Vivienne’s narrative. She describes the contextual hardships she faced in the education and labor subsystem in the form of powerlessness due to patriarchal gender expectations, and later on the difficulty to do business because of the war. She states:

“All my life was a challenge. At school, the challenge was to prove myself and to set a goal and then achieve that goal. At work, the challenge was to find a job … I then faced many difficulties in my career mainly due to the socio-economic and political status of the country. It is very hard in Lebanon to do a business plan because of the many factors involved. Here nothing succeeds because nothing is certain and nothing is fixed and it is near impossible to set accurate predictions”

(Vivienne)
She further describes her rebellion and her refusal to be powerless, and decided to challenge patriarchal gender norms and to success in her business despite the turbulent political climate. The end of her quote also shows her career calling drive. She states:

“I never thought of professions as being for males only or females only and people knew this about me. I did not use to work from home particularly because of this issue. I never conformed to social norms and I was always dreaming of enhancing the status of women”

(Vivienne)

Vivienne further explains how she developed a new business model aimed at supporting women, both in the labor and consumer markets. She states:

“I created Banat (girls) Taxi for old people and children that are only driven by women. All mothers prefer that their children go with Banat Taxi. There are a lot of girls who thanked us for our service because they could not go out before that. Not only did we create a new market but also provided work opportunities for women who would not have been able to work otherwise.”

(Vivienne)

5.2.3. Anxiety

This third category of “Anxiety” included the affective reactions related to feeling worry, concern and/or stress. As noted in Fig. 1, the main concepts emerging in the 1st-order analysis referenced the anxiety related to growing up and living in the civil war, as well as the regional strife in neighboring countries. In addition to this, concern and stress about the gender unfriendly work context (e.g., aggression and harassment at work) emerged, as well as the general stress of working in the Lebanese labor market due to the socioeconomic and political instability. These anxiety-related factors were often numerous and interacting. Maysa, for example, explains how she was raised in a conservative family and was the only female child in a family of five. At that time, Lebanon was facing the civil war, so her parents were overprotective and worried about her safety. She states how this made her feel anxious about her future. She states: “Sure enough this led me to believe that I may not get the chance to attend college and to attain my degree” (Maysa). She further explains how this worry was tied to her career calling drive that was also coupled with a feeling of responsibility toward her community:

“Although this had me constantly worried and pressured during my teenage years, it shaped the aspirational woman that I grew up to be. I became drawn towards the idea of success and constantly wanted to prove that I was qualified, able to pursue my dreams, and to reach the highest of positions. Furthermore, contributing to my society is very important to me in terms of being part of an organisation that serves a need for our community and contributes to our surrounding.”

(Maysa)

Nada’s narrative offers a vivid illustration of the complexity of affective reactions tied to hardships experienced in various subsystems. She recalls feeling marginalized in her early career:

“When I was 20, I was obsessed (like all Lebanese people are) about a steady job, a steady income, and the “career path”. This “career path” is a bit fictional because we imagine ourselves in a country where there is a ladder. Here in Lebanon the ladder is like two steps, or there is no ladder, you hit the ceiling really quickly which is why people leave”

(Nada)

This marginalization due to patriarchal gender norms made her feel stressed about her career possibilities:

“It is super stressful because you are up against very difficult systems and you are investing a lot of your personal self.”

(Nada)

She describes feeling generally aware of the harshness of these roles in the cultural subsystem:

“But when I realized that there is something wrong with the society and culture, it helped a lot. What changed for me, after maybe the age of 25–26, is that I did not care about a career anymore. All the things I was taught to care about, I just did not care about them; not the prestige, not the fixed job, not the income”

(Nada)

She continues further describing how her calling drive emerged:

“I never knew what I wanted to do, but all the professional jobs always seemed not enough, not enough in terms of existential fulfillment of “why are you here in this life”. Of course, I am not here to organize events nor am I here to work in a bank or work in business. I wanted something super fulfilling, and I could not pursue a writing career like in other places where you could be a writer and be fulfilled. So I wanted to do things that could make a difference and that I was super passionate about, so I chose activism”

(Nada)

5.2.4. Isolation

As noted in the final row of Fig. 1, the “Isolation” theme related to feelings of restriction and boredom. Much of the examples provided by the women tended to paint a picture of structural limitations not providing them the basics to thrive and to be free to develop and achieve. Whether due to discriminatory perceptions of personal limitations or external war-related events some of the women described feelings of being alone and limited in movement. For example, Maysun’s narrative exemplifies the feeling of
isolation when growing up in Lebanon in a time of war, and when exposed to violence. As a child, her reaction to the violence often came in the form of feeling isolated and restricted. She states:

“As kids, we couldn't go out because of the war, we could not play outside, and sometimes we even could not go to school. So we spent so much time at home, and boredom was a part of our life because we could not do anything except play with our toys and read a little bit. So the television started becoming a very important part of my life, and we used to wait for it because it was not available for 24 hours and even sometimes there was no power/electricity”

(Maysun)

As shown in the quote above, due to her isolation, Maysun spent her time watching TV. The TV allowed her to access alternate realities and to escape the violence in which she was living. This is when she described her sense of being driven toward a calling to make movies and to project a better image of Lebanon. Today, Maysun is a successful Lebanese movie producer and activist, creating movies that call for tolerance and peace. The following quote illustrates the emergence of her career calling drive:

“So I used to spend a lot of time in the video store choosing films, and I think that it is the fact that it made me escape the reality of my own life or the boredom of my own life that I started wanting to become part of this world. I decided very early on that I wanted to be a filmmaker to create these stories or to create these realities - that had nothing to do with my own reality. It is the only way, this is the only place that it is allowed for you to be like other people, to create other lives, to live other lives”

(Maysun)

Maysun's experienced hardships were not only tied to violence experienced in the political subsystem, but also to the powerlessness felt in a labor subsystem with no support for the arts:

“You grow up really thinking that nothing is possible, because Lebanon is too small and insignificant, because we are a country at war. So I had this dream of making movies, never knowing if I was going to be able to do it or not”

(Maysun)

She also describes feeling aware and the rise of a career calling drive to overcome such challenges:

“I was always sure about it. This is something I was going to do one day, even if it sounded impossible. It really sounded impossible, but I was practically 100% sure that one day I was going to make a film, and one day I was going to go to Cannes, and one day I was going to make a speech on stage. I truly believe that everybody has an aim in this life. So for me I just want to be aware of this responsibility, being able to understand that I am here for a purpose, and to fulfill this purpose on all levels. ...And I am trying to do this also as much as I can with my work. I actually understood that through films you can really make a change, I think it is a very noble cause, a very noble aim. And, I think we have to be - as filmmakers - more and more aware of that”

(Maysun)

6. Discussion

Responding to the call of this special issue on developing new insights on calling and careers, we focus on the role of contextual hardships in the formation of career calling. We began by teasing apart various manifestations of contextual hardships, by exploring the experience of oppressive forces manifested across political, financial, education and labor, cultural domains, and women's affective reactions to such experiences. Our analysis revealed a complex cacophony of oppressive forces weighing down on the lived experiences of our sample women. Being embedded in a difficult national context, and surrounded by regional and civil war, sectarian and tribal imperialism, patriarchal gender norms and barriers, and many other contextual hardships, appears to shape the affective reactions, and to ultimately motivate their career calling drive. Taken together, our main contribution suggests that individuals can develop a career calling in response to an oppressive environment as opposed to in spite of it. Beyond this, our study also asserts that adopting a more feminist lens in our analysis helps us pay better attention to the complex intersecting contextual dynamics of oppression that are shaping women's experiences and awareness and, in turn, their career calling. Finally, our study suggests that neoclassical and modern conceptualizations of calling must be bridged in a useful way forward for career calling literature. We will discuss each of the three points next.

6.1. Oppression as generative contextual hardships toward the formation of career calling

Our findings suggest that although contextual hardship is restrictive and often places limits on women's careers, it can also be generative and can shape a person's career calling. Indeed, for our specific sample of women, our analysis showed that the experience of contextual hardship led to a wide array of affective responses and to the development of a career calling drive geared toward attenuating the experienced hardship. Similar to what has previously been suggested by Barnett and Hyde (2001) and Halpern (2005), many of our participants perceive their careers as a calling, a conduit for change, and an avenue for enacting meaningfulness and purposeful change.

When growing up in a society imbued by oppressive forces, our sample of women gained an awareness of the oppressive forces and felt an urge to act or to do something about them. Although perhaps not an average occurrence, there is evidence from other fields of similar remarkable reactive patterns emerging in some individuals. For example, this is reminiscent of the Czech dissident and later politician Vaclav Havel's career path. As captured in his writing on the power of the powerless and social political dissidents,
he describes dissidents as those who emerge from conditions of oppression with ideas of change and revolution (Havel, 1985). Our participants have described similar feelings of being oppressed and feeling a desire to create change. The women in our sample did not describe an active search for calling; but rather that their calling was accompanied with strong affective responses of worry, anger, and perhaps most powerfully “becoming aware”, with a responsibility to do something about it.

Such strong affective responses have been documented in the career calling literature (e.g., Elangovan et al., 2010) as necessary preconditions to career calling formation. Exploring further the breadth and type of affective responses to the formation of career calling is an important area of future research. Efforts to tease out the cognitive-affective processes that lead to calling formation and those that lead to a sense of giving up is an interesting direction for this research. Black feminist activists and scholars who note the need for immediate and passionate change efforts have made similar assertions. Angela Davies, for example, famously stated: “I’m no longer accepting the things I cannot change… I’m changing the things I cannot accept.” Similarly, Ella Baker notes that for oppressed people to truly become a meaningful part of society they must change the power systems. She concludes that: “It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.” Both famous quotes capture how an oppressive context might trigger affective reactions and feelings of injustice and exclusion, which in turn may trigger a sense of calling to change their realities.

One limitation of our study was the sole focus on a sample of women who were notably successful role models and who had a career that fits the scholarly description of calling. As one of our anonymous reviewers insightfully asked: What of the other 20 women whose successful careers were not experienced as a calling? To this we also wonder: what about the women who were not successful, but still had a sense of career calling? Future research may want to explore these groups of women to better understand how they approach their work in such harsh contexts. Tracing the factors that might predict which women respond to hardships by calling is an important area of future research. E

6.2. Feminist orientations concerning women’s careers, career calling and “becoming aware”

Turning our attention to secondary contributions and taking our findings holistically, it is clear that for the majority of participants, being a woman figured saliently in their narratives. Embedded within all five faces of experienced oppression were references to being female and how this served to disadvantage their professional careers, and negatively colored their experiences in the workplace. Although these experiences have been of interest to career and career calling researchers over the years, a more nuanced analysis of these experiences is still a gap in this literature. As presented in our literature review at the beginning of this paper, existing research has largely focused on the complexities of multiple responsibilities dictated by socially constructed gender roles, leaving room to expand this work to include a more critical perspective.

Such a critical perspective enables an exploration of how gendered socio-cultural, political and economic factors influence and interact to shape the formation of a women’s career calling. Our analysis adopts just such an approach. By focusing on contextual hardships, we place front and center the obstacles faced by our participants often emerging largely due to the fact that they are women. To this end, our analysis begins to make sense of these gendered obstacles from the perspective of the women themselves. This analysis reveals that many of the obstacles largely arise due to oppressive patriarchal power dynamics that the women face. Even obstacles that are not initially viewed as patriarchal or gendered, upon further reading, are clearly exacerbated by gendered power dynamics. One major limitation of our study with regards to unpacking gendered dynamics is our focus only on the experiences of the women in our sample. One direction for future research would be to include research on gender more broadly and on the impact of masculinities on the formation of career calling in such harsh contexts. Thus, future research may benefit from a feminist lens to unpack the complex and intersecting gender dynamics shaping the nature of diverse sociocultural institutions and systems for both women and men.

Furthermore, future research can also benefit from centralizing the idea that women (and other oppressed groups) may have an epistemic advantage or privilege (Harding, 1993). This idea is a central tenet of Feminist Standpoint Theory (see e.g., Smith, 2004; Hill Collins, 2004), asserting that certain socio-political positions occupied by oppressed groups can become sites of “privilege”, where these groups (and the individual members) have an advantage for asking questions and understanding the social and political power dynamics of both the marginalized and the oppressors. In this way therefore, “standpoint theories map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemic, scientific and political advantage” (Harding, 2004: 7–8). In our study, many of the women’s narratives captured statements describing this sort of understanding of their oppression and of the associated social and political power dynamics. This affective reaction of “becoming aware” of the experienced contextual hardships, according to Feminist
Standpoint Theory, may in fact provide these women an epistemic privilege to clearly see and understand their lives and those of their oppressors (Harding, 1993).

In light of the current findings, therefore, future careers research adopting a more explicit feminist standpoint may help us further understand the process through which oppressed groups become acutely aware of the contextual hardships and the ways in which this awareness shapes their career calling trajectories. This line of research is elaborated below.

6.3. Career calling conceptualizations: bridging the neoclassical and modern approaches

The third additional contribution of our study is that it adds insights to both neoclassical (e.g. Dik & Duffy, 2009) and modern approaches (e.g. Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011) to career calling research and suggests a hybrid approach whereby external and negative contextual factors may work to drive a person’s internal sense of career calling. Similar to previous calls in the literature (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Duffy et al., 2014) stressing the need to better explore the sources of calling, our research calls for concerted focus on the antecedents of career calling. Understanding the potential predictors of career calling in different contextual realities will help complement our understanding of this important phenomenon, and adds to the body of knowledge that brings attention to context while studying career calling (e.g. Dik & Duffy, 2009; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). Furthermore, such research can help to uncover other potential contextual factors serving as facilitators to career calling formation, and to further build our understanding of the facilitative role of hardships in careers more generally.

It is important here, however, to be cautious and to not over-interpret the power of personal agency over structural constraints. This type of over-interpretation is dangerous in harsh context as it may unduly blame the individual for a lack of career success. The positive stories of our sample of successful women are not to be used as fuel to further burden individuals that carry the weight of disadvantage, but rather as evidence that single stories of human resilience and generative spirit can emerge even under the most difficult of circumstances.

6.4. Additional limitations and general future research directions

In addition to the limitations and future directions noted above, the subjective interpretation of the data could be regarded as a limitation, and caution is needed in generalizing the results of this study. Our findings however, also lend support to the value of using an inductive and interpretative qualitative approach to obtain a detailed and nuanced understanding of the formative role of contextual hardships in women’s career calling. Furthermore, and as alluded to above, future research could further examine how differences in context can potentially predict the formation (or not) of career calling. While our initial sample was comprised of 40 successful women embedded in the same context, we found that 20 of them developed an actual sense of career calling that fit the specific criteria derived from the literature (Dik & Duffy, 2009). While we have demonstrated how their calling originated from the experience of oppressive experiences across national business subsystems, and was driven by a set of affective reactions, we cannot ignore that the other 20 women did not develop similar responses. This raises the importance of individual level factors such as agency, self-efficacy, and resilience in deciding how to react to such hardships. Moving beyond our qualitative design, future quantitative research could assist in better unpacking individual-level constructs that can help answer the question: why is it that when embedded in the same context, some individuals develop a sense of calling while others do not? Expanding beyond the NBS-Five Faces of Oppression framework to include specific moderating or mediating variables in attempts to map the antecedent processes of career calling formation may be fruitful for future research.

Finally, we would like to end by re-highlighting the importance of examining the intricacies of context in future career research. Adding to the other insights derived from the other papers in this special issue, we call for more focus on the contextual and affective antecedents of career calling specifically. In particular, we would like to emphasize, similar to the direction suggested above by Feminist Standpoint Theory, that future research further explore how different levels of awareness concerning oppression may help to predict differences in emergent career and career calling pathways. In fact, the literature suggests that when oppressed individuals become aware of their oppression across the contextual subsystems, they experience a certain degree of conscientization (see Freire, 1973, 1993). In turn, resistance to oppression develops (Bartky, 1990). Here there is a rise of critical consciousness whereby marginalized people learn to critically analyze the conditions of their oppression and then are motivated to change them (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011) and to address the perceived injustice (Freire, 1973; Watts et al., 2011).

In effect, a person’s awareness of his/her oppression in one or across many of the NBS subsystems is a first step toward positive change (Freire, 1973, 1993). Exploring reactions against oppressive contexts, and resistance to its various manifestations may be particularly relevant to the study of career calling and to the career patterns of oppressed groups (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Could it be, for example, that certain contextual hardships give rise to different types of awareness and in turn to different types of drive toward pursuing careers associated with collective action for a more just and fair society? This, and similar questions, may be a fruitful direction for future research in this area. Overall, the current study provides evidence of the resilience of the human spirit and provides remarkable examples of the career calling experiences of women who rise up in the context of hardship to work differently and make change.

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