



## The Reality of the Psychological Needs of Women Working in Higher Education Institutions in the Light of Some Demographic Variables

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### ABSTRACT

The current research aimed to identify the reality of the psychological needs of women working in Palestinian universities. The study also aimed to identify the differences in psychological needs, experience, marital status, and the nature of work (academic/administrative), the basic research sample of (96) women working in higher education institutions, aged (35-50) years with an average age (40.31) the researcher took into account that they were distributed on the academic/administrative), marital status. The researcher used a psychological needs scale prepared by the researcher, which includes dimensions such as security, love, self-esteem, physiological needs, knowledge, aesthetic needs, and self-actualization. The psychometric characteristics of the instrument were verified in terms of validity and reliability. Although the study is theoretically informed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the measurement instrument was developed based on a broader conceptualization of psychological needs. Therefore, SDT is employed as an interpretive analytical framework rather than a direct operational model for measurement. The researcher relied on the descriptive approach and the data were analysed using the T Test, correlation coefficients. The results also showed that there are differences in the dimensions of psychological needs in the direction of married women, as well as according to the nature of work in Favor of academic work. The results were interpreted in light of the results of previous research and studies, as well as commenting on the limitations of the current research results. The research ended with the presentation of a set of recommendations and proposals for subsequent studies.

### KEYWORDS

Psychological Needs; Working Women; Higher Education; Self-Determination Theory; Demographic Variables

## INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, psychological well-being among women at universities is one of the most urgent concerns for educational leadership, organizational legitimacy and institutional viability. Schools increasingly operate under the shadow of increased accountability, performance evaluation, and normative scrutiny, where leadership credibility and trust are critical to institutional performance. The Psychological experiences are not merely individual phenomena but also reflect institutional conditions, but also important indicators that leadership structures are considered legitimized, inclusive, and worthy of confidence in the context of such an environment. For women in higher education, especially in socially and politically isolated settings, psychological needs remain unmet, which erode professional engagement, leadership potential, and retention, deteriorating the capacities and ethics of institutions.

Legitimacy in leadership is institutionalized not through formal authority or enforced procedures but through everyday actions that indicate recognition, justice, and trustworthiness. Contemporary research on institutions and legitimacy argues that the legitimacy of organisations is socially shaped by stakeholders' assessment of institutions and leaders' conformity to normative expectations, distributive justice, and moral trust (Reinecke et al., 2022; Suddaby et al., 2017). Leadership practices that undercut certain groups of trust-based authority or symbolism at universities could diminish institutional legitimacy even though participation appears to be formally inclusive. Recent studies also show that perceived legitimacy has psychological and emotional benefits, such as enhanced trust, safety, and commitment to organizational goals (Devine, 2024; Johnson et al., 2024).

These dynamics are particularly crucial in conflict and resource-limited environments. Insurgent politics, economic uncertainty, restricted mobility, and external control on Palestinian universities add pressure on institutional leadership and credibility. In this sense, women are in professional roles marked by organizational hierarchies and broader socio-cultural preconditions for access to authority, recognition, and leadership pathways. Research on recognition and status processes shows that even when people are actively participating, their exclusion from valued roles undercuts their sense of competence, sense of belonging, and social legitimacy (Amer & Obradovic, 2022; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022). As recognition is unevenly distributed, institutions risk reintroducing symbolic inclusion without power in any substantive sense.

This research examines such dynamics by utilizing SDT, an integrative psychological framework used to examine how workplace environments shape autonomy, competence, and relatedness that cause autonomy, competence, and relatedness experiences. SDT argues that satiating these primary psychological needs is necessary to maintain motivation, well-being, and engagement, while need frustration is associated with stress, disengagement, and withdrawal (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Leadership and institutional dynamics represent one of the primary sources by which can either support or undermine employees' psychological functioning. Competence

is defined as a function of recognition, trust, and development opportunities, and connectedness by inclusion, respect, and acceptance.

SDT has also been used to examine motivation, leadership traits and organizational contexts in higher education, primarily within stable Western institutions. Yet it has largely been used as a diagnostic tool to assess the level of leadership climate and legitimacy at war-torn Arab universities. Despite studies in Palestinian and regional higher education settings that have highlighted occupational stress, gender discrimination, and psychological pressures on working women, most of this literature is descriptive and under-researched. Thus, university leaders lack theory-based tools to identify what aspects of leadership practice and organizational structure most directly shape women's psychological experiences and professional sustainability.

In addition, previous studies in Palestinian contexts have primarily focused on general work conditions, pressures, and gender-related challenges, without systematically examining psychological need satisfaction as a structured construct or analysing how it varies across demographic characteristics. Demographic variables, defined as quantifiable characteristics of individuals such as years of professional experience, marital status, and nature of work (as well as commonly examined attributes such as age, gender, education, and income) are used to categorize participants and analyse differences between groups in social and organizational research. These variables, commonly referred to as "boxcar" variables, are important in understanding behavioral patterns as well as differences across groups. In the current study, these variables are used as analytically important dimensions of differential access to recognition, resources, and professional opportunities in higher education institutions.

This is a serious lacuna. The psychological process by means of which establishments obtain compliance, dedication, and belief – and now prioritize legitimacy, trust, and recognition – is of rising significance in modern-day organizational studies (Luoma & Hietanen, 2025; Kunisch et al., 2023). In the absence of recognition, procedural justice, or symbolic acceptance, people may feel isolated, disenfranchised, and psychologically beyond their own unaware limits (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023). These aspects are particularly salient in the context of higher education, as professional identity, knowledge, and morality are key aspects of academic and administrative work.

In other words, psychological need satisfaction in this study is a diagnostic trait relevant to leadership and not just a personal characteristic. Using SDT as an analytical lens, this research studies women's experiences of autonomy, competence and belonging in the context of higher education in the specific country, and how these characteristics vary through structures and demographic conditions which reflect variation in access to recognition and power.

The particular demographic variables of experience, marital status, and type of work were chosen based on theoretical assumptions of their importance in organizational positioning and access to resources, as well as previous literature that has addressed their importance in the professional and psychological lives of women. Therefore, the research questions are not

arbitrary, as they are based on the assumptions of Self-Determination Theory as well as the gaps in previous studies.

More specifically, this study is aimed at: (1) determining the level of psychological need satisfaction, which is conceptually interpreted in light of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as proposed by Self-Determination Theory of women in the Palestinian college campuses; (2) exploring the differential level of psychological need satisfaction of women according to their years of professional experience, marital status, and type of work as an indicator of their position in the administration at the college level; and (3) contributing to the evidence base of leadership practices and organizational policies that emphasize the importance of legitimacy, trust, and inclusion in administration at the college level.

The study presents a comparative study of the psychological state of leadership among females with restricted access to higher education with the integration of Self-Determination Theory and the contemporary perspectives on legitimacy, recognition, and institutional trust. It goes beyond inclusion-level metrics to assess the quality of women's professional life, and it offers a theoretically justified foundation for educators in assessing institutional well-being and in developing leadership programs that support equality and institutional resilience.

### **Research Questions**

Based on Self-Determination Theory and contemporary perspectives and leadership legitimacy, recognition, and institutional trust, the research questions addressed in this paper are:

RQ1. What is the level of basic psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) among women working in Palestinian higher education institutions?

RQ2. Do levels of psychological need satisfaction differ significantly according to years of professional experience (less than 15 years versus more than 15 years)?

RQ3. Do levels of psychological need satisfaction differ significantly according to marital status (married versus unmarried women)?

RQ4. Do levels of psychological need satisfaction differ significantly according to the nature of work (academic versus administrative roles)?

These research questions are designed to diagnose how institutional leadership climates and organizational structures shape women's psychological experiences in higher education, rather than to test causal relationships.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Understanding organizational psychological well-being requires a theory that can show the role of institutional contexts in motivation, involvement, and ongoing functioning. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is among the most empirically robust and conceptually accurate for this purpose. SDT suggests that the optimal functioning of the human functioning is dependent on satisfying three key psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ajlouni et al., 2022; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy – freedom of action, or self-choice – is the act of creating choice. Individuals feel they contribute; have discretion and voice

to the work they do in a workplace that allows them to retain control. Competence is the need to feel good, capable, and ready to tackle challenges, but it is reinforced through recognition, feedback, and opportunities for improvement. Relatedness is the need to feel loved, valued and socially connected to others in a community or organization. Many studies have demonstrated that satisfaction of these needs leads to improved well-being, motivation, performance, and persistence, and that need frustration leads to stress, disengagement, and withdrawal (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

SDT is particularly appropriate for studying workplace motivation because it specifies psychological mechanisms that correlate organizational conditions with individual outcomes. Rather than delineating needs descriptively, as is the case with unlike Maslow's model, SDT emphasizes the dynamic interaction between needs and social contexts, there is an emphasis on the social and institutional contexts in active support or contravention of psychological needs over time (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, SDT is particularly appropriate for identifying leadership climates, governance practices, and institutional cultures in complex organizations like universities.

Leadership practices are central to addressing psychological needs in an organization. Adapted from SDT research, autonomy-based leadership, based on participation in decision-making, acceptance of viewpoints, and non-controlling direction, consistently correlates with higher levels of employee motivation and wellbeing (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Controlling or exclusionary leadership practices breed a lack of autonomy and effectiveness leading to burnout and disengagement. In the context leading to the well-being of employees, the legitimacy and trust of leadership in higher education are critical factors. Universities are more than simply bureaucrats; they are normative institutions where perceived fairness, skill, and moral trust are crucial (Deepphouse & Suchman, 2008; Gauchat, 2023). While leaders are perceived as legitimate, individuals feel more secure psychologically, and emotionally towards the institution (Johnson et al., 2024; Devine, 2024).

Recent organizational research also demonstrates that legitimacy is evaluated at the institutional level as well as in the everyday interactions of leaders, which constitute inclusion, recognition, and procedural justice (Tost, 2011; Tyler, 2006). But, if certain groups are excluded from trust-based authority or recognition, legitimacy is undermined even when these groups are made active (Haack et al., 2021; Schoon, 2022). From an SDT perspective, such environments are likely to distract from competence and relatedness needs and generate psychological costs which are not reflected by surface inclusion measures. Research in higher education is increasingly showing how governance, decision making, and recognition practices contribute to the professional identity and belonging of staff (Geurts et al., 2024; Gonzales et al., 2024). However, relatively few studies explicitly bring these observations into the context of SDT as a means to examine the impacts of leadership climates on psychological need satisfaction among university workers, especially outside of Western contexts.

In non-Western and cross-cultural contexts, a growing body of research supports the applicability of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in explaining psychological need satisfaction and work-related outcomes. Cross-cultural evidence demonstrates that the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is consistently associated with well-being across diverse cultural settings, despite variations in institutional and socio-cultural conditions (Chen et al., 2015; Tay & Diener, 2011). In organizational environments, leadership practices that support autonomy have been shown to significantly enhance motivation, engagement, and psychological functioning among employees (Slemp et al., 2018). Additionally, recent developments in the Basic Psychological Need Theory have stressed the generalizability of these needs while also pointing to the importance of contextual and institutional factors in their satisfaction (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Importantly, empirical evidence from the Arab region supports these relationships. For instance, research conducted among university students in the United Arab Emirates demonstrates that the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness significantly predicts motivation, effort, and learning outcomes, thereby confirming the applicability of SDT constructs within Arab educational contexts (Alamer, 2021). However, despite this growing body of evidence, applications of SDT within Arab higher education contexts remain limited, particularly in relation to leadership legitimacy and demographic variability, which underscores the importance of the present study.

It is structural and symbolic inequality that persists in shaping women's academic and professional experience. Gender and leadership research in particular demonstrates the effects of role congruity, which suggests that women are penalized by their employer when expectations for leadership are in conflict with gender norms and are perceived as less respected and trusted (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These have psychological consequences too; notably, limited recognition frustrates competence satisfaction and exclusion from decision-making frustrates autonomy. Recent research on recognition and status processes reveals that psychological health hinges upon participation, not merely social validation and legitimacy. Recognition is a relational process that establishes someone as competent, worthy, and entitled to exercise power (Amer & Obradovic, 2022; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022). Even within historically inclusive community, people may experience exclusion when the distribution of recognition is unequal. The discriminatory exclusion has tangible and immediate costs to mental health and well-being.

Such illegal, undervalued, or practices that are imposed without recognition have been shown to damage autonomy and competence in an organization and contribute to psychological strain (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023). This research also supports SDT's perspective on the significance of supporting psychological needs and perceptions of leadership's role. In fact, the professional career of Palestinian students and Arab women more broadly is governed by a sophisticated regime of social, political, and institutional regulation. Local research has identified work-related pressures, gender-related barriers, and psychological challenges for women in universities. This research provides valuable information.

Yet, one of the major problems with much of this literature is that it does not integrate with modern psychological and organizational theory. While research on leadership practices and institutional structure supports motivation, well-being, and professional development, problems are typically listed but not characterized by psychological mechanisms through which they can be psychologically mediated. The findings, in turn, provide little guidance for leadership intervention or organizational change. This theoretical gap is consequential. A recent review of legitimacy and governance has emphasized that institutions in unstable circumstances need to be highly vigilant about trust, recognition, and procedural fairness as a way to sustain confidence and commitment (Anesa et al., 2024; Suddaby et al., 2017). Without such a framework as SDT, it is unclear whether the political climates of leadership within Palestinian universities can or should defuse women's basic psychological needs, or how demographically and professionally placed would enable this.

Thus, the existing gap is addressed in the present paper by using Self-Determination Theory as a analytical framework for studying women's psychological experiences within Palestinian higher education. Rather than looking at psychological well-being as a conditional or private issue, the research interprets need satisfaction as a leadership-relevant indicator of institutional climate, legitimacy, and equity. This research, by bringing SDT into contact with literature on legitimacy, trust, and recognition, also contributes to a better understanding of how the environment of leadership shapes autonomy, competence, and relatedness in a structural constraints and instability. In doing so, it goes beyond the descriptions of women's participation to review how their professional experience compares to other qualitative evidence for developing inclusive leadership and organizational change in higher education systems with similar challenges.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

This paper employs a post-positivist, pragmatic approach to research that uses systematic observation to provide evidence of instructional leadership practice. While the organization is a social construct, the post-positivist philosophy also assumes that psychological constructs can be judged with enough reliability and rigor when they are based on theoretical tools.

This study is based on the theoretical foundation of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which proposes leadership behavior and institutional climate as contextual conditions to fulfill three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These three needs are proposed as psychological routes by which employees experience leadership legitimacy, acknowledgment, and inclusion. Demographic and occupational characteristics are treated as structural moderators rather than causal determinants.

To meet the purpose of the study, the study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative correlational comparative survey design. This approach allows for observing patterns of psychological need satisfaction and group differences across important demographic variables

without establishing causality. It is appropriate for exploratory leadership research when experimental or longitudinal approaches are not practical. This design was employed to describe the level of psychological need satisfaction and to examine differences across demographic variables, including years of experience, marital status, and nature of work (academic/administrative), without implying causal relationships. The psychological need dimensions measured in this study (security, love, self-esteem, physiological needs, knowledge, aesthetic needs, and self-actualization) represent the main study variables, while demographic characteristics were used as grouping variables in comparative analyses.

The independent grouping variables in this study include years of experience (less than 15 years vs. more than 15 years), marital status (married vs. unmarried), and nature of work (academic vs. administrative), while the dependent variables consist of the measured dimensions of psychological need satisfaction (security, love, self-esteem, physiological needs, knowledge, aesthetic needs, and self-actualization), operationalized through the researcher-developed scale.

**Figure 1.**

*Conceptual framework of psychological needs and demographic variation in Palestinian higher education.*



**Research Context, and Study Sample**

This study explores the lived experiences of working Palestinian women in academia and administration at Palestinian higher education institutions that function and exist under

conditions of political insecurity, economic insecurity, and limited mobility. These three factors directly shape the leadership practices, governance, and workplace experiences in Palestinian universities.

The population consisted of women working at universities in Palestine who had experience working with sufficient experience in the university to assess the leadership climate and the satisfaction of psychological needs. The basic research sample consisted of (96) women, as indicated in the results section, distributed across academic and administrative roles, marital status (married/unmarried), and years of experience (less than 15 years / more than 15 years).

A purposive, non-probability sampling technique was used to identify potential participants owing to the absence of a central, readily accessible sampling frame and the sensitive research topics. Probability sampling techniques are seldom achievable in such context-specific settings as Palestine. Participants capable of reflecting on their psychological experiences about their psychological experiences at the university or workplace. It guarantees contextual relevance, yet it risks the generalizability. These results are regarded as diagnostic and exploratory, useful for informing leadership practice until estimates are available for the whole population. The sample comprised 96 mid-career women, aged 35 to 50 years; a carefully selected age where eligibility for leadership positions, institutional loyalty, and risk of leaving the institution reside. The potential for statistical generalization is further compromised by the limited age range and the non-probability sampling techniques. Such limitations are fully acknowledged and align with the leadership-diagnostic nature of this work, instead of the predictive.

### ***Instrumentation: Measurement of Psychological Need Satisfaction***

#### Theoretical Foundation of Measurement

Although the study is theoretically informed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the measurement instrument used in this research is a scale developed by the researcher to assess multiple dimensions of psychological needs. These dimensions include security, love, self-esteem, physiological needs, knowledge, aesthetic needs, and self-actualization, as presented in Tables 1–3. Therefore, the instrument does not represent a direct application of the BPNSFS (Chen et al., 2015), but rather a contextually developed measure aligned with the broader concept of psychological needs.

#### Cultural Adaptation and Administration

Given the cultural and institutional context of Palestinian higher education, the researcher-developed scale was administered in Arabic to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the target population. The items were designed to represent culturally significant ways that individuals experience their psychological needs, enabling participants to report them accurately based on their experiences within the institutional setting.

1. Forward translation into Arabic.
2. A back-translation into English.
3. Review from two psychology and educational leadership specialists.

#### 4. Pilot testing to ensure accuracy, relevancy, and conceptual equivalence.

This process aimed to ensure linguistic clarity, cultural appropriateness, and conceptual consistency of the psychological need dimensions measured in the study.

#### ***Psychometric Properties of the Instrument***

##### Internal Consistency

Internal consistency reliability was assessed by using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each subscale and the whole scale. These coefficients indicate scale reliability but they are not a substitute for factorial validity testing. In order to establish the construct validity, exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the pilot dataset through principal component extraction with Varimax rotation. As revealed by the results, the scale demonstrated a multi-factor structure which was mostly in alignment with theoretical expectations, as the majority of factors loaded over 0.40. The sampling adequacy index, known as Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, was adequate for factor analysis, while Bartlett's Test of Sphericity proved its statistical significance (See Table 1, appendix). Nevertheless, because of the relatively small sample size (n=96) in the main part of the research, the multi-factor structure can be regarded as provisional rather than final.

The coefficients presented represent item–dimension correlations indicating the contribution of each item to its corresponding psychological need dimension.

##### **Reliability Analysis**

Reliability was assessed more rigorous through the test-retest procedures, for four weeks during each administration to the pilot sample.

##### **Table 2.**

*Reliability Coefficients of the Psychological Needs Scale Using Cronbach's Alpha and the Test–Retest Method*

<b>Scale Dimensions</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>Test–Retest Reliability</b>
Need for Security	0.761	0.754
Need for Love	0.788	0.763
Self-Esteem Need	0.789	0.743
Physiological Needs	0.779	0.766
Need for Understanding	0.748	0.762
Aesthetic Needs	0.749	0.766
Need for Self-Actualization	0.745	0.758
Total Score	0.840	0.828

Apart from consistency within itself and exploratory factor analysis, there was also evidence for construct validity in terms of theoretical congruence with psychological theories of needs and expert evaluation of the scales. However, the lack of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) constrains the validation of the latent variables of the instrument. It is suggested that

future studies use larger sample sizes and conduct CFA to establish its dimensions and increase construct validity.

In this study, although internal consistency and stability indicators were calculated, a confirmation factor analysis (CFA) was not performed because of sampling constraints. This limitation is explicitly acknowledged. Thus, the absence of CFA does not support definitive claims of factorial validity and is addressed in terms of a direction for future research. Importantly, there are no analyses that interpret correlations beyond theoretical or statistical significance and the study does not make latent-structure claims without the data.

**Scoring Procedure**

The scale items were measured using the Likert scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of psychological need satisfaction. The scores were computed for all the dimensions of the scale, including security, love, self-esteem, physiological needs, knowledge, aesthetic needs, and self-actualization, as well as the overall score, which represents general psychological need satisfaction.

**Table 3.**

*Scoring Method for the Psychological Needs Scale*

Main Scale Dimensions	Number of Items	Minimum Score	Maximum Score
Reality of Women’s Conditions	17	0	17
Need for Security	20	20	60
Need for Love	10	10	30
Self-Esteem Need	20	20	60
Physiological Needs	12	12	36
Need for Understanding	11	11	33
Aesthetic Needs	7	7	21
Need for Self-Actualization	12	12	36
<b>Total Score</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>310</b>

**Data Collection and Ethical Considerations**

Data was collected through open-ended structured questionnaires. The participants were made aware of the purpose of this study, the confidentiality and anonymity of this research study, and their right to withdraw at any time.

This decision was ethically sanctioned by the institution concerned. There was a high level of ethical consideration involved in conducting research in conducting human subjects; gender, power relations, institutional context were particularly relevant in this study.

**Data Analysis Strategy**

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were used to assess baseline levels of psychological need satisfaction. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine group differences based on years of experience, marital status, and nature of work. Effect sizes were planned to assess the magnitude of observed differences and to avoid overreliance on p-values; however, they could not be

reported due to incomplete subgroup variance data. The analytical focus was diagnostic rather than causal, emphasizing leadership-relevant patterns of vulnerability and support.

## RESULTS

However, it is important to note that the dimensions obtained in the results, such as security, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization, are not direct measurements of the three basic psychological needs according to the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Rather, these are measurements of broader categories of psychological needs, which can be conceptually interpreted in terms of the three basic psychological needs according to the SDT. For example, the category of love and belonging can be related to relatedness, while self-esteem and self-actualization can be related to competence. Thus, the results are interpreted in terms of the three basic psychological needs according to the SDT, but since these three basic needs were not measured, Research Question 1 was answered conceptually.

### ***Descriptive Statistics of Psychological Need Satisfaction***

Descriptive statistics were used to assess the level of satisfaction regarding the psychological needs of the female workers in the Palestinian higher education institutions. Means and standard deviations were computed for all dimensions of psychological needs and the entire scale.

The following descriptive and inferential analyses are based on the researcher-developed scale dimensions of the psychological need constructs instead of the SDT constructs.

**Table 4.**

*Descriptive Statistics for Psychological Need Satisfaction (N = 96)*

<b>Psychological Need Dimension</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Need for Security	37.78	11.09
Need for Love	20.24	5.67
Self-Esteem Need	37.56	10.56
Physiological Needs	24.67	6.02
Need for Understanding and Knowledge	23.30	5.29
Aesthetic Needs	17.22	4.05
Need for Self-Actualization	24.51	5.84
<b>Total Psychological Needs Score</b>	<b>196.56</b>	<b>43.67</b>

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the psychological need satisfaction across all the dimensions that were measured. The results indicate that there is variability in the mean scores across the needs, implying that the extent to which the psychological needs are satisfied differs across the respondents. The total score shows that the level of psychological need satisfaction in the respondents was moderate.

### ***Differences in Psychological Need Satisfaction by Years of Experience***

Independent sample t-tests were used to examine the difference in terms of psychological need satisfaction on years of professional experience (less than 15 years and more than 15 years).

The reason for excluding the dimension of “Need for Understanding and Knowledge” from comparative analysis was due to insufficient data for all experience groups.

**Table 5.**

*Independent Samples t-Test Results by Years of Experience*

Dimension	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Need for Security	>15 years	52	46.50	6.26	19.395	0.01
	<15 years	44	27.50	1.86		
Need for Love	>15 years	52	24.69	1.93	15.762	0.01
	<15 years	44	15.00	3.90		
Self-Esteem Need	>15 years	52	46.23	6.17	19.531	0.01
	<15 years	44	27.31	1.90		
Physiological Needs	>15 years	52	28.76	3.13	10.668	0.01
	<15 years	44	19.84	4.98		

Table 5 presents the differences in terms of satisfaction with psychological needs based on the participants’ years of experience in the profession. The findings revealed that participants with more than 15 years of experience scored higher satisfaction with some dimensions of the psychological need than the participants with less experience. These findings are relevant to addressing Research Question 2.

***Differences in Psychological Need Satisfaction by Marital Status***

To examine the differences between married and unmarried individuals in psychological need satisfaction, separate sample t-tests were performed.

**Table 6.**

*Independent Samples t-Test Results by Marital Status*

Dimension	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Need for Security	Married	46	47.41	6.01	17.266	0.01
	Unmarried	50	28.94	4.40		
Need for Love	Married	46	24.89	1.91	12.293	0.01
	Unmarried	50	15.98	4.56		
Self-Esteem Need	Married	46	47.15	5.91	17.463	0.01
	Unmarried	50	28.74	4.36		
Physiological Needs	Married	46	29.19	3.06	10.088	0.01
	Unmarried	50	20.52	5.03		
Need for Understanding and Knowledge	Married	46	27.39	2.53	10.670	0.01
	Unmarried	50	19.65	4.34		

The findings presented in Table 6 directly address Research Question 3, which examines the differences in terms of psychological need satisfaction based on marital status. The findings revealed that married women scored higher on the dimensions of the presented psychological needs with significant statistical differences between the two groups. These findings should be

interpreted within the context of the study's descriptive and comparative design, which aims to identify patterns of variation rather than establish causal relationships.

## DISCUSSION

This research study aimed to identify the psychological need satisfaction of women working in Palestinian higher education using Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Responses to RQ1 indicate moderate levels of satisfaction with psychological needs and a high degree of disparity between demographic categories. These patterns, not individual preferences, suggest that institutional leadership environment is central to women's psychological experiences at work. As with SDT, leadership environments that lack meaningful choice, acknowledgement of ability, and inclusive relational structures undermine autonomy, competence, and relatedness satisfaction. The findings also indicate that women's widespread participation does not translate into a sufficient psychological empowerment. This divide points to a leadership climate of formal inclusion, without substantive autonomy or validation of competence that has been cited in scholarship on legitimacy as symbolic rather than moral or relational legitimacy (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Haack et al., 2021; Suddaby et al., 2017).

Findings addressing women's lack of access to leadership trust and decision-making power directly address RQ1 and offer an insight into an important SDT mechanism. Hence, the observed "trust deficit" is not a generalized insecurity, but a failure of support for autonomy and validation of competence. When women are involved with committees and operational processes but not in leadership power and resource control, they participate without autonomy and contribute without recognition. Such conditions, from the SDT perspective, frustrate freedom, as one cannot influence decisions objectively; and competence, when individuals' abilities are implicitly devalued. This interpretation echoes studies that show that legitimacy and trust in leaders produce emotional and psychological gains by establishing individuals' status and effectiveness in institutions (Johnson et al., 2024; Devine, 2024). On the other hand, perceptions of illegitimacy or symbolic inclusion reduce motivation and participation. Recognition research supports this interpretation. Amer and Obradovic (2022) show that recognition is not simply affirmation of one's feelings, but a structural sign of value. When leadership trust is limited selectively, professionals lose professional legitimacy in both competence satisfaction and institutional identification. Similar patterns have been observed in research on epistemic injustice and legitimacy within higher education, where failure to serve on the authority indicates a loss of credibility and status (Gonzales et al., 2024; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022).

The finding that RQ2 differs based on years of experience is one of the strongest findings of the study. Women with more than 15 years of experience were more satisfied regarding psychological needs, particularly needs that can be interpreted as reflecting aspects of autonomy and competence. This pattern suggests that psychological need satisfaction accumulates over time as older women gradually gain authority in decision-making, institutional

recognition, and professional legitimacy. But this trajectory should not be taken as a natural or desired process of organizational change. Instead, it exposes a systemic inability of leadership to support early and mid-career women. SDT stresses that support for autonomy and competence is a key component of the professional lifecycle; but, if such support is not provided until seniority is reached, institutions may lose interest and eliminate promising early-career workers. This is consistent with studies of legitimacy in unstable or transitional institutions where legitimacy and trust are to be maintained, particularly in times of vulnerability (Anesa et al., 2024; Gauchat, 2023). Without early identification and participation, people may be lost long before they reach managerial positions and hence organizational resilience and leadership pipelines.

The RQ3 difference reflects an important interaction between psychological need and external sources of satisfaction. Married women were more satisfied with psychological needs in all dimensions, which can be understood by SDT as external compensation for relatedness needs. Marriage may provide solid emotional support and social validation to try and compensate for institutional gaps. Of crucial importance, this does not free institutions of responsibility. SDT posits that psychological needs are the responsibility of organizations in the work setting. Given that unmarried women consistently report lower levels of relatedness and satisfaction with competence, this suggests that institutions are implicitly constructed around assumptions of external support that can reproduce inequities. Research on social exclusion and illegitimate task assignment supports this interpretation; those who lack other sources of validation are likely to be psychologically stressed by organizations that do not provide inclusive environments (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023; Rawat et al., 2022). In addition, research on legitimacy and belonging in professional education shows that institutions are required to consciously construct inclusive relational environments rather than relying on private social resources (Jarus et al., 2023).

The implication is that there are no statistically significant differences between academic and administrative positions (RQ4). This is consistent with the assumption that psychological need satisfaction is not a function of job-related needs, but a product of institutionally agreed upon leadership and governance. This underscores SDT's emphasis on context: autonomy, competence and relatedness are mediated by organizational climate, instead of by occupational category. This is consistent with the theory of legitimacy, which views legitimacy as an institution-wide phenomenon instead of an attribute within local contexts (Tost, 2011; Schoon, 2022). It also echoes research into co-creation and participation in higher education, which suggests, which genuine inclusion is driven by governance rather than by formal roles (Geurts et al., 2024). This is a benefit to leadership because it simplifies intervention efforts. Instead of looking at specific groups of workers, institutions should address systemic governance strategies such as hiring, recognition, and decision transparency.

Together these results expand existing literature in three important ways. First, they empirically show that psychological need satisfaction serves as an indicator of leadership

legitimacy within higher education as it complements previous theoretical research on legitimacy and trust (Tyler, 2004, 2006; Suddaby et al., 2017). Second, they go beyond the descriptive histories of women's participation in universities in Palestine to reveal specific psychological mechanisms through which leadership practices define professional experience. Third, they situate SDT within more broadly institutional and legitimacy debates, giving an exemplar of the way in which it can be used to analyse leadership contexts in conflict-sensitive and resource-constrained environments. Because this thesis draws on SDT in conjunction with scholars of legitimacy, recognition, and trust, it responds to calls for theoretically grounded organizational research that can lead to meaningful institutional change (Anesa et al., 2024; Bennett-Weston et al., 2023).

This study has both practical and theoretical implications. From a practical point of view, the results of this study suggest that leadership climates in HEIs should be focused on satisfying employees' psychological needs as a way of building perceived legitimacy and trust. For example, institutional leaders of HEIs operating in conflict-affected and resource-constrained environments, such as Palestinian universities, may benefit from using leadership climates that enhance employees' perceptions of recognition, inclusion, and professional value. From a more theoretical perspective, this study adds value to the existing literature by integrating Self-Determination Theory and institutional legitimacy models in a non-Western and conflict-sensitive environment. This study expands the generalizability of Self-Determination Theory. The novelty of this study is based on the application of a psychological needs framework as an approach to exploring how leadership climates affect women's professional experiences in HEIs, particularly for underrepresented Arab women. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The use of a non-probability purposive sample and a cross-sectional design limits the generalizability and prevents causal inference. Additionally, the reliance on a researcher-developed measurement instrument, rather than a standardized SDT scale, constrains direct theoretical generalization to core SDT constructs. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific and are most appropriately applied to similar institutional, cultural, and geopolitical environments characterized by structural constraints and gendered professional dynamics.

Overall, the current study lays the groundwork through a theoretically sound SDT measure of psychological need satisfaction in a sample of cross-sectional survey data from women working in Palestinian institutions of higher learning. Beyond the limitations of sampling and psychometric properties, it constitutes an appropriate starting point for examining leadership climate, institutional legitimacy, and professional experience through a gendered lens.

## CONCLUSION

This study applied Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to examine the needs of women in Palestinian higher education institutions. By defining autonomy, competence, and relatedness

as psychological processes that relate to leadership, the research focused instead on descriptive accounts of women's participation but identified institutional leadership environments that influence professional experience and organizational legitimacy.

These results show that women's broad participation in the institutional and academic world does not translate into psychological empowerment. This lack of trust in leadership continues to undermine autonomy and competence, limiting women's decision-making power and recognizing their leadership potential. But, the evidence of years of experience that indicates marked differences in psychological need satisfaction is gradual and not institutionally guaranteed, suggesting a systemic failure to support early and mid-career women. Separately, marital status also suggests that social contact with outsiders may partly compensate for unmet relatedness needs and thus shift the burden of psychological support from the institution to the private sphere. Finally, the absence of job type differences indicates that psychological need satisfaction is a function of leadership practices across the institution and not role-specific needs.

#### Theoretical Contribution

This research adds to the literature by demonstrating the role of psychological need satisfaction as a measure of leadership legitimacy and institutional effectiveness in higher education. By combining Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with scholarship on legitimacy, recognition and trust, it demonstrates how leadership climates are psychologically shaped by motivation, engagement, and retention, particularly in a conflicted and resource-limited context.

#### Empirical Contribution

In practice, this research brings organizational research from SDT into a context under-reviewed and provides evidence from Palestinian universities where leadership practices are embedded in political and institutional instability. These results provide rare, contextual insights into women's autonomy, competence, and relatedness in a system of higher education with structural constraints.

#### Practical Contribution

In practice, the study provides educational leaders with a theoretical basis for determining the institutional climate and leadership interventions that move beyond superficial inclusion toward substantive empowerment. The research demonstrates how psychological needs are systematically met and provides concrete steps to improve equity, fairness and organizational viability.

#### ***Recommendations, Limitations, and Final Implications***

The findings of this study are based on Self-Determination Theory and focus on leadership practices that directly promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness among women in higher education institutions. Universities need to move beyond the symbolic role of participation towards creating institutions that give women real power over academic and administrative decisions. Increasing the role of distributed leadership and the increase of

transparency in decision-making are needed to increase trust, professional voice and leadership legitimacy.

Job satisfaction may be further enhanced when institutions foster women's capacities for professional effectiveness and leadership. Consistent application and communication of clear and unbiased criteria for promotion and the selection of leaders is essential. Early recognition of the professional and administrative accomplishments of women faculty and their early participation in leadership development programs can reduce the delay in validation of their competence and foster their leadership trajectories.

The feeling of belonging is about creating inclusive organizational climates. Support and mentoring networks, open professional environments, and respectful, fair, and psychologically secure leadership can foster institutional belonging and reduce reliance on external social support.

There are some limitations. Purposive sampling and cross-sectional design limit generalizability and exclude causal inference. Future studies could employ longitudinal and mixed-method approaches across multiple institutions to assess the long-term impact of leadership intervention on psychological need satisfaction.

Finally, a woman's psychological well-being and career longevity stand as proxy for leadership legitimacy and organizational health. When autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are fulfilled in leadership positions, these norms will be aligned and higher education institutions will have more equitable, motivating, and ethical leadership systems.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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**APPENDIX**

**Table 1.**

*Internal Consistency Coefficients of the Researcher-Developed Psychological Needs Scale*

Item No.	Need for Security	Need for Love	Self-Esteem Need	Physiological Needs	Need for Understanding	Aesthetic Needs	Self-Actualization
1	0.641**	0.638**	0.595**	0.541**	0.496**	0.441**	0.481**
2	0.596**	0.516**	0.586**	0.535**	0.481**	0.436**	0.478**
3	0.610**	0.569**	0.563**	0.484**	0.511**	0.485**	0.521**
4	0.607**	0.489**	0.536**	0.529**	0.524**	0.420**	0.478**
5	0.566**	0.525**	0.566**	0.523**	0.514**	0.473**	0.683**
6	0.539**	0.486**	0.598**	0.517**	0.528**	0.517**	0.615**
7	0.662**	0.518**	0.606**	0.683**	0.614**	0.541**	0.686**
8	0.552**	0.543**	0.575**	0.615**	0.527**	—	0.545**
9	0.511**	0.501**	0.586**	0.686**	0.534**	—	0.683**
10	0.547**	0.537**	0.638**	0.545**	0.547**	—	0.615**
11	0.683**	—	0.683**	0.683**	0.683**	—	0.686**
12	0.615**	—	0.615**	0.615**	—	—	0.545**
13	0.686**	—	0.686**	—	—	—	—
14	0.545**	—	0.545**	—	—	—	—
15	0.683**	—	0.683**	—	—	—	—
16	0.686**	—	0.546**	—	—	—	—
17	0.545**	—	0.683**	—	—	—	—
18	0.547**	—	0.514**	—	—	—	—
19	0.515**	—	0.613**	—	—	—	—
20	0.531**	—	0.568**	—	—	—	—

Note: The scale is a researcher-developed instrument measuring multiple psychological need dimensions (security, love, self-esteem, physiological needs, knowledge, aesthetic needs, and self-actualization), and is not based on the BPNSFS structure.