

# Dirty and demeaning

Psychosocial risk in female domestic  
workers in Chile

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# Background

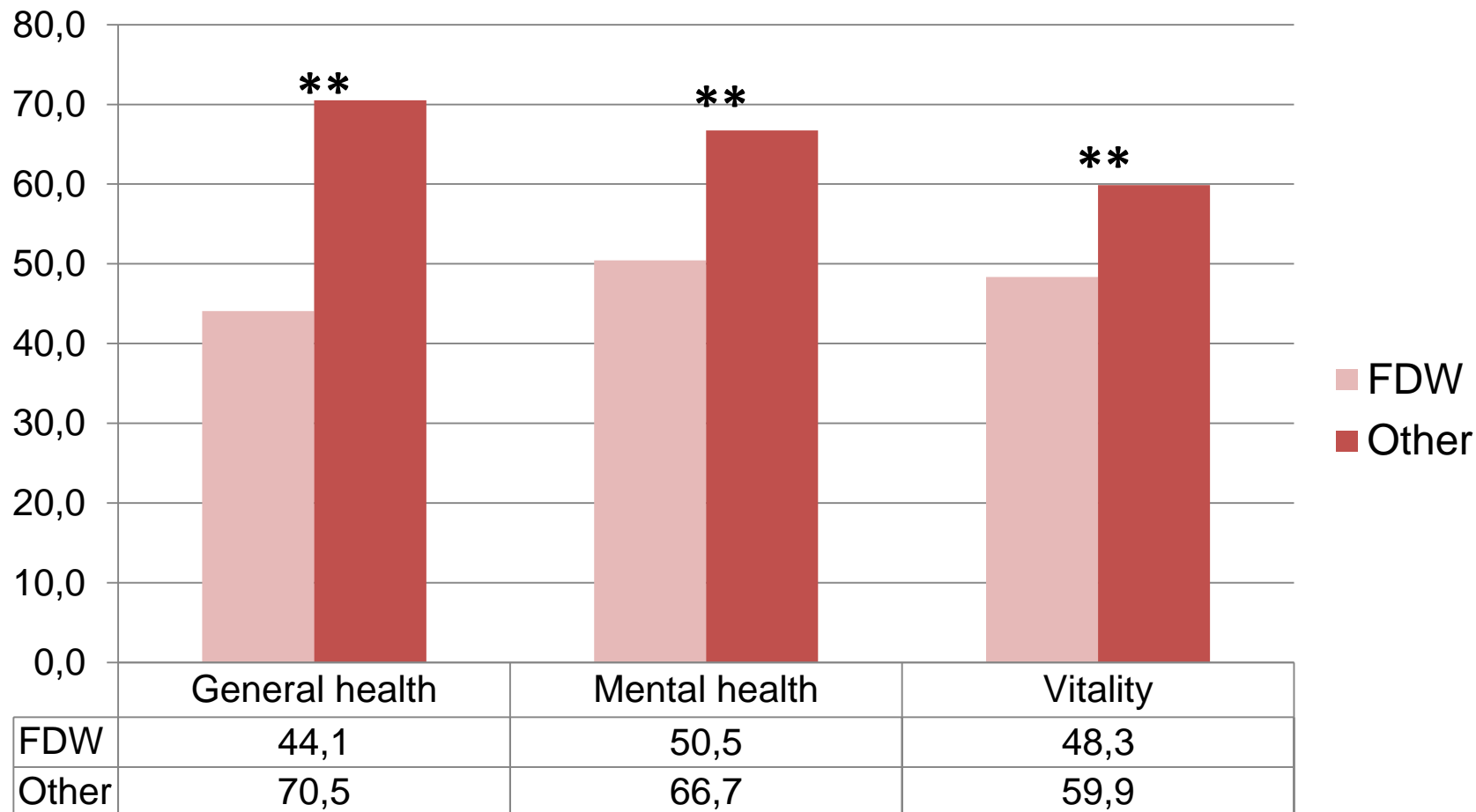
- Paid domestic work is socially undervalued and is estimated to be an activity with high psychosocial risk (PSR)
- How **high** is PSR in female domestic workers (FDW) in Chile?
- Is PSR related to mental health variables?

# Method

- Quantitative and qualitative cross-sectional study
- FDW unions contacted
- Use of COPSOQ Chilean version (SUSESO/ISTAS21)
- Modified by FDW themselves (new scale of *domestic risk*)
- Participation of authors in national FDW meetings
- Questionnaires applied during national meetings, or by union leaders in regions of the country, sent back by hand
- 291 complete questionnaires analysed
- After making the statistical calculations, we met with the leaders and discussed with them the results

# Mean health score. FDW / Chilean standard.

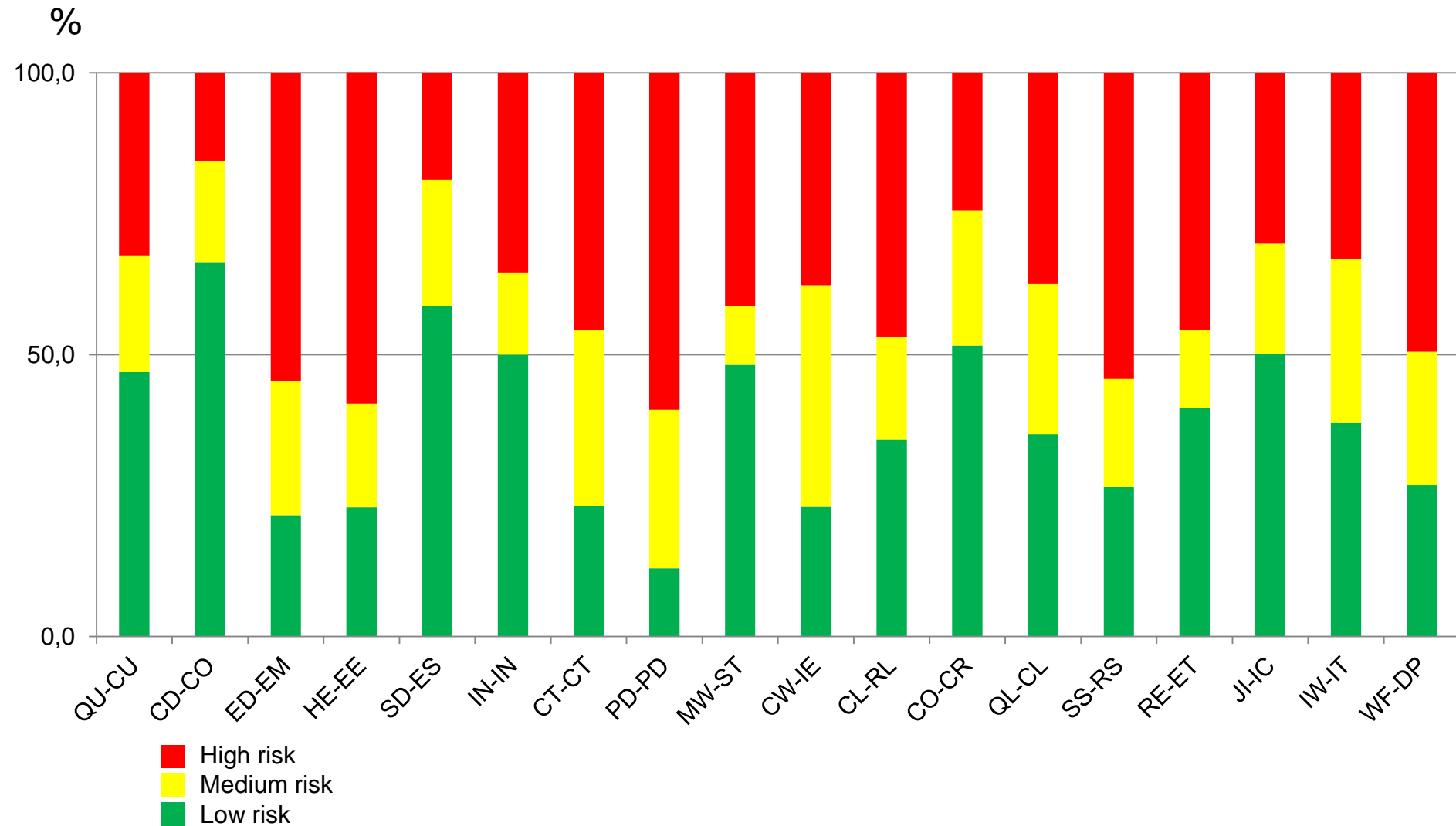
score



\*  $p < 0,05$

\*\*  $p < 0,01$

# Prevalence (%) of risk levels. FDW.



# Results

- Health scores (general, mental, vitality) were lower (poorer health) than in other Chilean workers, without associations with socio-demographic variables (ie: age, nationality, education, income) nor employment variables (weekly hours, contract)
- 7 dimensions with a prevalence of LOW RISK close to or above 50% (Quantitative, Cognitive, Sensory demands, Influence, Meaning of work, Conflict of role, Job insecurity)
- 5 dimensions with a prevalence of HIGH RISK close or above 50% (Emotional demands, Hide emotion demands, Possibilities of development, Relationship with employer, Reward).
- There was no relationship between risk dimensions and socioeconomic variables
- We examined scales items to see where the greatest risks were concentrated.

# Excerpts from FDW interviews

- «Most of us are low-income people who do not often live in nice houses [and] enter this world of nice houses that are not our homes, but we want to be in those houses (...) and there begins this problem of low self-esteem»
- « While we are not ashamed and [we think] that domestic work is a profession or it is an important job, as long as we are clear about this, we must not allow ourselves to get lost»

# Discussion

- We did not find high PSR in FDW
- But we find poor general and mental health scores
- The core problem seems to be:
  - Social devaluation and
  - Personal disdain for their own job
- “Nobody” wants to do house chores
- It’s a dirty and demeaning work (to clean a dirty bathroom of another person...)
- There is a delegation of the work (dirty and demeaning) from one woman (the employer) to another (the domestic worker), and in this operation the man observes no changes in his position
- The classic models of psychosocial risk at work are insufficient to address paid domestic work.



# Conclusions

- Low levels of health and high risk of emotional demands on FDW could be associated with the "delegation of dirty work", the self and social contempt for an activity that "nobody wants to do", in an environment where they are acutely aware of the difference of social levels between the house where they work and their own homes, which probably causes shame and low self-esteem.
- Consequently, classic models of psychosocial risk at work seems to be insufficient to address paid domestic work.
- An interesting perspective of research is opened by associating levels of mental health and risk of the scales of emotional demands with the social devaluation of the domestic work activities.