

REVIEW

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Gendered degrowth transformation for care and justice in Europe

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Abstract

This article introduces engendering degrowth as a novel, transformative response to the ecological and social crises fueled by perpetual economic expansion. A gender-informed transformative capacity framework is developed to redefine degrowth as the equitable reduction of production and consumption centered on a life-affirming economy, a proposal that fundamentally challenges the growth imperative. This analysis is enriched by feminist economics, which underscores that a genuine transition requires a paradigm shift from a capital-centered to a life-centered economy, acknowledging the central role of care for people and the planet. The degrowth utopia is intertwined with the concept of a “living society,” promoted by organizations like Reinventing Society, which redefines prosperity in terms of vitality, connection, and collective well-being. By integrating new theoretical perspectives, such as the Ecomindsponge, Nature Quotient, and Sustainability Mindset, the article’s main contribution is to show that the feasibility of degrowth hinges on a prerequisite mindset shift at the micro, meso, and macro levels, essential for a just transition to a post-growth society. Although the European Union avoids the term “degrowth” in legislation, the discourse gains ground among academics, activists, and policymakers, as evidenced by European initiatives. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at fostering gender- and care-centered socio-ecological transformation. Degrowth represents a viable path to a just and habitable future, but only when framed as an indispensable socio-ecological transition rooted in gender justice and the revaluation of care.

Keywords Degrowth, Post-growth, Sustainability, Feminist economics, Ethics of care, Gender justice, Socio-ecological transformation, Utopian mindset, Just transition

1 Introduction

The prevailing economic paradigm, deeply rooted in the belief that constant economic growth is essential for societal progress, has significantly shaped global geopolitics and development [1–3]. Despite warnings from its originator, Simon Kuznets, against using Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the sole measure of well-being, GDP became central to economic policy after the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944. This relentless pursuit of macroeconomic expansion has led to a global economic system dependent on the continuous exploitation of finite natural resources and the extraction of value, often



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from marginalized communities [4]. Consequently, the promised correlation between economic growth and reduced socio-economic disparities and poverty has largely failed to materialize due to unequal wealth distribution. This growth imperative has also accelerated resource depletion, caused significant environmental degradation, and intensified climate change. For instance, the unsustainability of industrial food production is now understood to stem fundamentally from political-economic structures, necessitating a multidimensional critique [5].

The escalating climate crisis, demanding rapid and unprecedented decarbonization, brings the limitations of this growth-centric model into sharp focus. Conventional approaches often propose “green growth”—the idea that technological innovation and efficiency gains can decouple economic growth from environmental impact. However, mounting evidence suggests that absolute decoupling at the necessary speed and scale for rapid decarbonization has not occurred and is unlikely to happen, especially within planetary boundaries [6–11]. This reality underscores the necessity of fundamentally re-evaluating our pursuit of economic growth to achieve the rapid emission reductions required.

In response to these systemic crises, the degrowth paradigm has emerged as a crucial intellectual and activist movement [12–14]. It seeks to fundamentally re-evaluate the dominant economic model, advocating for alternative frameworks that prioritize social welfare and ecological integrity over mere economic expansion [6–8]. Degrowth discourse, gaining increasing attention among academics, activists, and policymakers, explores its potential to address contemporary issues like climate change mitigation [2]. Proponents argue that its careful implementation could be vital for shifting economic systems towards a sustainable path, potentially averting societal collapse [3, 9]. However, the practical feasibility and effectiveness of translating degrowth theory into concrete policy remains subjects of ongoing debate, particularly concerning its implicit call to overcome capitalist structures and its necessary confrontation with systemic drivers of ecological breakdown [15, 16]. This debate is further enriched by feminist economic perspectives, which highlight the inherent gendered dimensions of economic systems and the central role of care in socio-ecological transformation.

This article situates degrowth at the intersection of feminist ethics and sustainability frameworks, arguing for an engendered transformation that centers care as fundamental to socio-ecological justice. Through a comprehensive literature review, we explore degrowth’s definition, contested nature, and pathways to sustainability, and critically analyze its positioning within the European Union’s legislative framework and alongside alternative sustainability paradigms. Drawing on feminist economic insights, we emphasize the necessity of re-centering care for people and the planet in degrowth theory and practice. Subsequently, we present a novel transformative capacity framework designed to operationalize engendering degrowth, followed by an examination of practical implementations and key research milestones in Europe. The discussion reflects on the challenges and opportunities of institutionalizing degrowth-informed policies, concluding with policy recommendations aimed at fostering just and care-centered socio-ecological transitions.

2 Literature review: degrowth, feminist ethics, and sustainability frameworks

2.1 Degrowth: definition, nature, and pathways to sustainability

The concept of degrowth, multifaceted in its theoretical underpinnings and historical emergence, cannot be ascribed to a singular origin [4, 12]. Rather, it synthesizes critiques from diverse academic and social movements that challenged the inherent growth paradigm of modern economies [4, 12]. While seemingly a contemporary intellectual current, the term “degrowth” or “décroissance” was first articulated in 1972 by the French intellectual André Gorz [2, p. 29]. He provocatively questioned the compatibility of a steady-state Earth, requiring no growth—or even degrowth—of material production for survival, with the continued existence of the capitalist system [2, p. 29]. This foundational query underscored the profound systemic implications of a non-growth trajectory for both ecological stability and societal structures [2, p. 29].

Since Gorz’s initial proposition, the degrowth concept has undergone substantial evolution, shaped by various contributing factors [17, 18]. Academically, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the development of “steady-state” economic models by ecological economists such as Herman Daly, Joan Martinez-Alier, and Robert Costanza [17, 18]. These models sought to balance human well-being with ecological and social limits, representing a critical precursor to contemporary degrowth discourse [12–15]. By the 2000s, the movement’s focus sharpened on scrutinizing the detrimental socio-ecological consequences of neoliberal policies, including privatization, deregulation, and austerity measures [19, 20]. The formal adoption of “degrowth” in English at the Paris Conference marked a pivotal moment, fostering the expansion of a global scientific community dedicated to this concept beyond its initial French and Italian intellectual strongholds [2, 8]. This evolution prompts a crucial inquiry: What precisely constitutes degrowth, and what theoretical constructs and conceptual frameworks have converged around this emerging paradigm?

Degrowth can be rigorously defined as the equitable reduction of production and consumption, designed to simultaneously enhance human welfare and improve ecological conditions across local and global scales, in both the short and long term [2, 18, 19]. Consequently, it implies a transformative process wherein the resultant societal state must be sustainable, yielding demonstrable environmental and social benefits [9, 20]. The paradigmatic assertion of degrowth is that “human progress is possible without economic growth” [13, p. 12]. Furthermore, some scholars posit it as an inevitable outcome absent radical technological breakthroughs sufficient to stabilize global climate systems [3, 21, 22].

Importantly, no prominent degrowth theorist advocates for perpetual contraction; rather, degrowth is conceptualized as a transitional pathway toward a steady-state or post-growth society [21, 22]. “The central idea of post-growth is to replace the goal of increasing GDP with the goal of improving human wellbeing within planetary boundaries.” [21, p. e62].

A critical distinction must be drawn between unsustainable degrowth (economic recession coupled with the deterioration of social conditions due to declining production) and sustainable degrowth [13, 23]. In the latter, the primary objective is the attainment of sustainable and social welfare, rendering the reduction of GDP a secondary, though often unavoidable, consequence [13, 23]. The fundamental aim of degrowth is not merely to shrink GDP, but rather, the observed reduction in GDP emerges as a

natural and inevitable outcome of prioritizing alternative socio-ecological objectives [3, 24]. Moreover, it does not mandate a universal reduction across all sectors; indeed, targeted growth may still be necessary for small and medium-scale economic activities, renewable energy deployment, public transportation systems, and the development of impoverished regions or communities [3, 24].

Degrowth transcends mere “dematerialization”—the decoupling of material and energy consumption from economic growth [2, p. 110]. It asserts that increasing efficiency alone is insufficient, and may even be counterproductive, if it continues to enable overall consumption growth (the Jevons Paradox) [6, 25]. However, this perspective does not advocate for restricting technological or intellectual advancement. Instead, it champions innovation aimed at achieving more with less [2, 7], emphasizing sustainable practices and conscious lifestyles. Rejecting the imperative of perpetual growth does not necessitate a regressive return to an idealized pre-industrial past; rather, it seeks to construct a sustainable alternative future [14, 26]. Within a degrowth framework, research and technological progress would focus on innovations that reduce aggregate consumption through appropriate, resource-limited technologies and conscious lifestyle choices, rather than continuously stimulating consumption through innovation [13, 21, 23].

The conceptualization of degrowth directly addresses the urgent need for rapid decarbonization. By advocating planned, equitable reduction in aggregate material and energy throughput, degrowth inherently facilitates deep emission cuts [3, 21, 23]. Unlike a recession—an unplanned, destructive contraction—degrowth is a deliberate and purposeful strategy for systemic transformation. It seeks climate stability by recalibrating economic activities within planetary boundaries, prioritizing well-being over endless accumulation [27, 28]. Therefore, while a reduction in GDP may be a concomitant outcome, it is not the primary goal; genuine ecological sustainability and social justice are paramount for climate resilience.

This nuanced understanding of degrowth necessitates a critical examination of its compatibility with existing economic structures, particularly economic organizations, an area identified as receiving limited scholarly attention in degrowth discourse [15]. Indeed, scholarship underscores that the unsustainability and injustice inherent in systems like industrial food production stem not merely from socio-technical or managerial fallacies, but fundamentally from political-economic structures and extractivist cultural models, necessitating a multidimensional degrowth critique to address these systemic drivers [5]. Furthermore, the challenges of achieving degrowth require a robust political strategy that directly confronts the systemic drivers of ecological breakdown, including a critical engagement with the role of the state [16].

In recent discourse, the term post-growth has emerged as a broader, umbrella concept encompassing various approaches that challenge the growth paradigm, including degrowth [21]. While degrowth explicitly advocates for a planned and equitable downsizing of economic production and consumption as a radical socio-ecological transformation, post-growth tends to be used more inclusively, encompassing steady-state economics, sufficiency, wellbeing, and doughnut economics. Both frameworks agree on the necessity to confront the ecological limits of capitalism and its growth imperative, but degrowth often incorporates a stronger critique of capitalism’s structural inequalities and socio-political dynamics, emphasizing systemic change beyond economic adjustment. Post-growth, on the other hand, sometimes presents a less radical, more

pragmatic vision to reorganize economic activity towards sustainability and well-being without necessarily calling for a deep rupture with capitalist relations. Clarifying these distinctions is crucial for situating engendering degrowth within the evolving theoretical landscape and for understanding its transformative potential in feminist and care ethics frameworks.

2.2 Reconceptualizing degrowth: utopia, social movement, or political project?

The concept of degrowth is multifaceted, often perceived as utopian, yet it functions as a dynamic social movement and a developing political project. This section aims to clarify the distinct roles and implications of these three dimensions, highlighting their collective potential to drive socio-ecological transformation.

Degrowth as Utopia faces the perception of being unrealistic due to the magnitude of vested interests in the growth paradigm. However, this “utopia” is a radically alternative vision, drawing inspiration from societies that have functioned without growth and from radical social experiments. Its utopian dimension serves as a normative compass, pointing towards a desirable future. Degrowth is not about a general shrinking of ‘the economy’ or reducing GDP, but rather about selective growth in meaningful areas, new prosperity indicators, sustainable business models, and care practices [3, 27]. While lower GDP might be a side effect in the Global North, degrowth scholars emphasize economic restructuring independent of aggregate GDP growth [13].

The degrowth utopia is intertwined with the concept of a “living society,” promoted by organizations like Reinventing Society, which redefines prosperity in terms of vitality, connection, and collective well-being [26]. This approach rejects the current social model, characterized by loneliness, burnout, and collective trauma, and proposes principles that shift from exploitation to regeneration and from competition to cooperation [29]. This vision of a “living society” demonstrates that degrowth is not an abstract theory, but a real and desirable utopia.

Degrowth as Social Movement manifests as an internal social option driven by collective will, prioritizing the deepening of democratic institutions and the politicization of the economy, combined with conscious, equitable consumption/production reduction [12]. It is crucial that degrowth remains connected to its political, democratic roots to avoid misuse [2]. Advocates stress its multidimensional nature, embracing diverse interpretations and proposals. As an “umbrella term” [12], its fundamental goal is to foster public debate for a just, sustainable future.

Degrowth as Political Project. While diffuse, degrowth offers a “de-accumulation strategy” [16]. Proponents have presented concrete policy proposals—from reduced working hours and universal basic income to relocalization and reorientation of technology—designed to materialize the degrowth vision through deliberate political action [5, 24, 29, 30]. This represents a fundamental challenge to existing economic organizations and power structures [15, 16]. Despite its growing academic and political relevance (e.g., the IPCC 2022 report), the question of its political feasibility remains open, particularly regarding how to translate these proposals into post-capitalist or post-sustainability thinking that challenges the dominant paradigm. Media portrayal, influenced by structural barriers and biases, significantly shapes public understanding of degrowth’s political potential [15]. Understanding these interconnections is vital for formulating effective

strategies that transcend mere theoretical advocacy and translate into actionable societal change.

2.3 The European union's legislative framework: the "growth lock-in"

The EU's legislative framework primarily adheres to principles of green growth, the circular economy, and the outreach of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), deliberately avoiding the term "degrowth" [31, 32]. Despite ongoing academic and civil society debates questioning this reliance on a growth paradigm for environmental objectives, the European Commission continues to project moderate GDP growth. Nevertheless, some EU policies do share commonalities with degrowth principles, particularly concerning resource efficiency and social well-being. This section assesses these policies through a critical degrowth lens, further enriched by insights from feminist economics and the ethics of care, to evaluate their potential for genuinely fostering socio-ecological transformation and addressing inherent inequalities.

The European Green Deal (EGD): The EU's flagship initiative, the EGD, aims for Europe to be the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050, effectively decoupling economic growth from resource use [33]. It encompasses deep decarbonization, biodiversity protection, pollution reduction, and sustainable food systems (Farm to Fork strategy) [33]. The "Fit For 55" package, with 13 interconnected policy proposals, targets a 55% reduction in net greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, including an expanded EU Emissions Trading System (EU-ETS), revised renewable energy targets, and stricter CO₂ emission standards. While distinct from degrowth's fundamental economic logic of absolute material and energy contraction, the EGD's focus on deep decarbonization, resource efficiency, and a just transition aligns with critical degrowth areas. From a feminist degrowth perspective, however, the effectiveness of this "decoupling" hinges on whether it genuinely shifts away from patterns of production and consumption that perpetuate gendered inequalities and undervalue care work, beyond mere technological fixes. Ecofeminist critique, for example, highlights that the "fundamental weakness of the Green New Deal" lies in its focus on the public sector, ignoring the private sphere of care [34, p. 94]. For a just transition, infrastructure policy must focus on "social infrastructures" that drive care, prioritizing "time prosperity" and natural rhythms over technocratic acceleration [34, p. 94–95].

Next Generation EU (NGEU): Launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this unprecedented €800 + billion recovery instrument aims for a greener, more digital, and resilient Europe [35]. A substantial portion (at least 37%) is allocated to climate action and environmental sustainability [35]. Member States receive funds primarily through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), requiring national Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) that align investments with green transitions, as exemplified by Spain's plan [35]. The NGEU thus serves as a major financial lever for green and digital transitions, albeit within a framework still oriented towards economic recovery and growth. A feminist degrowth analysis would critically examine whether these investments truly support the expansion of life-sustaining sectors (e.g., care, ecological restoration) and challenge extractivist models, rather than simply reinforcing growth in existing, potentially harmful, economic activities.

Just Transition Fund (JTF): A pivotal component of the European Green Deal, the JTF provides targeted support to regions and communities heavily dependent on fossil fuels

or carbon-intensive industries [36]. It facilitates investments in SMEs, new businesses, environmental regeneration, clean energy, and crucial worker retraining for green jobs [36]. The JTF underscores the EU's commitment to a socially fair green transition, ensuring support for those most affected by structural changes, an aspect that strongly resonates with degrowth's social equity goals [36]. This fund is particularly congruent with the feminist degrowth emphasis on justice, aiming to mitigate the disproportionate burdens of transition on vulnerable groups and foster equitable shifts in labor and community well-being.

Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP): The CEAP is a comprehensive strategy to transform Europe into a cleaner, more competitive economy by fundamentally changing product design, use, and value [37]. Its 35 initiatives prioritize waste prevention from the outset, focusing on designing sustainable products, empowering consumers, and adopting circularity in production processes [37, 38]. The CEAP aims to enhance product lifetimes, facilitate reuse, and promote repairability, thereby minimizing carbon and environmental footprints [39]. This strong emphasis on resource reduction and waste prevention, while framed within green growth, aligns with key aspects of degrowth principles related to material footprint [39]. Its adoption varies considerably among member states, with economic potential including job creation [40]. However, as has been noted [41], fully realizing the transformative potential of the Circular Economy requires strengthening its social dimension by incorporating the ethics of care and a gender perspective, ensuring technological, organizational, and social innovations transform the economy into true "loops of care" for people and the environment, beyond mere material efficiency. Without a fundamental shift from growth, CE risks optimizing resource flows for continued accumulation, not overall material reduction, failing to challenge planned obsolescence or demand stimulation [42, 43]. Deep political-economic structures and extractivist models require a deeper degrowth critique [5]. CE is largely compatible with capitalism.

2.4 Comparison with alternative sustainability frameworks

The concept of degrowth presents a fundamental counterpoint to many traditional notions of sustainable development, often making it challenging to discern close congruencies between them [44]. This fundamental divergence arises from the fact that numerous established sustainable development paradigms explicitly or implicitly prioritize economic growth as a prerequisite or means of achieving sustainability. In stark contrast, the degrowth concept is inherently critical of the prevailing economic system and its operating principles, thus necessitating a departure from capitalist models in favor of alternative paradigms [12, 32]. This section will critically examine several prominent sustainable development frameworks not only in terms of their environmental and social objectives but also by dissecting their conceptual nature—that is, whether they are presented as theoretical frameworks, sets of policies, or proposals for paradigm shifts—and, fundamentally, their degree of compatibility with the dominant capitalist economic system. In doing so, this section will highlight their convergences and, more importantly, their fundamental differences from degrowth.

This section will critically examine prominent frameworks—the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Green Growth, the Circular Economy, and Doughnut Economics—by dissecting their conceptual nature, their approach to growth, and their fundamental

compatibility with the dominant capitalist system. We will also analyze if and how these frameworks introduce our own analytical categories of Conceptual Nature, Primary Objective, Approach to Growth, Compatibility with Capitalism, Emphasis on Efficiency vs. Sufficiency, Systemic Critique, and Role of Care/Justice, as well as the Gender Perspective. In doing so, we will highlight their convergences and, more importantly, their fundamental differences from degrowth.

To further synthesize these distinctions, Table 1 provides a comparative overview of these sustainability frameworks through the lens of the degrowth principles.

The SDGs, adopted in 2015 [45], present a complex picture. While many goals align with degrowth (e.g., poverty, gender equality, climate action) [2, 7, 29, 44], Goal 8 explicitly promotes economic growth [46], a premise degrowth challenges. Critics argue this creates an inherent contradiction, undermining ecological SDGs [47]. The UN discourse notably omits degrowth [46], illustrating a “growth lock-in” within mainstream sustainable development, preventing a critical re-evaluation of the economic system itself [8]. The inherent tensions within the SDGs reflect a broader struggle to reconcile ecological limits with traditional development aspirations, largely leaving the deeper systemic drivers of unsustainability unaddressed [27]. While degrowth “is indissociable from the four principles of sustainability, democracy, justice, and wellbeing” [48, p. 16], the SDGs aim for global transformation, their reliance on existing institutional frameworks and an underlying growth imperative. Consequently, they often fail to challenge the very structures of power and economic organization that perpetuate ecological breakdown and injustice [15, 27]. Therefore, the SDGs are perceived more as an incremental political adaptation within capitalism than as a true paradigm shift that questions its foundations. Their integration of gender equality (SDG 5) can be instrumental if not focused on a deep transformation of patriarchal structures [49–52].

Green growth envisions economic prosperity decoupled from environmental degradation via innovation [53]. Degrowth views it as merely ‘greened’ growth [2, 54], relying on unsubstantiated absolute decoupling [9, 10]. Rebound effects often offset efficiency gains [6, 25]. Green growth fails to address ecological overshoot’s root cause (perpetual growth), risking “greenwashing” [55]. It operates fully within capitalist logics. Its technocratic approach generally lacks an explicit and profound consideration of gender perspective and social justice [34, 56].

The Circular Economy (CE) seeks to decouple environmental deterioration from economic expansion [37]. It advocates for a model emphasizing reuse, repair, and recycling [37, 57–60]. Degrowth scholars see CE as necessary but insufficient [57, 59]. While CE can boost resource efficiency, without a fundamental growth shift, it risks optimizing resource flows for continued accumulation, not overall material reduction, failing to challenge planned obsolescence or demand stimulation [42, 43]. Deep political-economic structures and extractivist models require a deeper degrowth critique [5]. CE is largely compatible with capitalism. As has been noted [41], it can be gender-neutral or even reinforce inequalities if it does not explicitly incorporate the ethics of care and gender justice.

Doughnut Economics [28] balances social needs with ecological limits. It shares degrowth’s critique of growth and emphasis on well-being [13, 21, 28, 57]. However, Raworth asserts compatibility with regenerative growth within boundaries [28]. Degrowth advocates for equitable contraction, while Doughnut Economics is

Table 1 Comparative analysis of sustainability frameworks from a degrowth perspective.

Source: Own elaboration

	Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Green Growth	Circular Economy (CE)	Doughnut Economics	Degrowth (Contrast)
Conceptual Nature	Global political agenda, aspirational targets	Policy/economic strategy framework	Production/consumption model, conceptual framework	Transformative economic framework, visual model	Paradigm shift, social movement, political project, transition pathway
Primary Objective	Universal well-being, poverty eradication, environmental protection	Economic growth while reducing environmental impact	Decoupling environmental deterioration from economic expansion (material/waste)	Balance social foundation and ecological ceiling	Equitable reduction of production/consumption for well-being and ecological integrity
Approach to Growth	Implicitly/explicitly growth-dependent (e.g., SDG 8)	Growth is prerequisite; absolute decoupling assumed	Growth-compatible; optimizes resource flows for continued accumulation	Growth-agnostic; seeks regenerative/distributive growth within boundaries	Fundamentally challenges growth imperative; aims for post-growth/steady-state society
Compatibility with Capitalism	Largely compatible; incremental adaptation within system	Fully compatible; seeks to green capitalism	Largely compatible; optimizes processes within existing system	Seeks to reform capitalism; can operate within reformed capitalism	Fundamentally critical; necessitates departure from capitalist models
Emphasis on Efficiency vs. Sufficiency	Mixed; often efficiency-focused	High emphasis on efficiency (technological fixes)	High emphasis on material efficiency	Balance of efficiency and sufficiency implicitly	Strong emphasis on sufficiency, reduced throughput, doing “more with less”
Systemic Critique	Limited; addresses symptoms, not root causes of growth imperative	Limited; avoids questioning growth imperative	Partial; focuses on material flows, less on power/values	Strong on boundaries, less explicit on systemic power dynamics	Fundamental critique of capitalist structures and growth imperative
Role of Care/Justice	Integrated into social goals (e.g., SDGs 1, 5, 10)	Limited; primarily economic/environmental focus	Needs explicit strengthening (e.g., “loops of care”)	Integrated into social foundation	Central to the analysis of exploitation and social reproduction

Table 1 (continued)

	Sustainable De- velopment Goals (SDGs)	Green Growth	Circular Economy (CE)	Doughnut Economics	Degrowth (Contrast)
Gender Perspective	Integrated into specific objectives (SDG 5). Risk of instrumentalization if not transformative	Generally absent or superficial. Technocrat- ic focus	Can be gender- neutral or reinforce inequalities if not explicit	Implicit in the “social founda- tion”, but not always explicitly de- veloped as a transforma- tive axis	Central to the analysis of exploitation and social reproduc- tion; seeks to dismantle patriarchal, anthro- pocentric, and market structures from an in- tersectional perspective

growth-agnostic on necessity [28]. Critics argue it lacks degrowth’s explicit systemic critique of capitalism and power dynamics [55], perceiving it as operating within a reformed capitalism. While it integrates a “social foundation” that includes equity, its explicit development on how to challenge gender structures or the invisibilization of care can be limited.

In conclusion, while these frameworks offer insights, they differ from degrowth in conceptual nature and compatibility with economic growth. Degrowth fundamentally challenges perpetual expansion as the driver of overshoot and inequality. Understanding these divergences is crucial for genuinely addressing crises, suggesting profound systemic transformation beyond mainstream frameworks.

2.5 Degrowth and feminist ethics: re-centering care for people and planet

The degrowth paradigm emerges from a critical re-evaluation of societal values, challenging the relentless pursuit of economic growth by prioritizing the holistic well-being of people and the environment [61, pp. 160–183]. This perspective underscores how the monetized economy, driven by endless expansion, inherently devalues both essential ecological processes and crucial caring activities, thereby perpetuating intertwined gender and environmental injustices [61, pp. 160–183].

The primary contribution of this article is to argue that the degrowth discourse itself is not gender-neutral, but rather requires an intersectional perspective to address issues of justice and inequality from this standpoint. Feminist degrowth visions directly address this by advocating for an “incremental, emancipatory decommodification and a commonization of care, aiming to establish transformative caring commons that transcend capitalist structures and traditional public/private dichotomies” [62, pp. 1–28]. From this perspective, the ethics of care becomes a vital lens, transforming economic activities into loops of care, reconnecting economy, environment, and society [41]. As Mies and Shiva [63] articulate, “the care of women includes the care of their environment... the capacity of women (and men) to give and receive care depends fundamentally on understanding our relationship with the environment and of the need to treat the environment sustainably” [63]. Furthermore, “logics and ethics of care that are responsive to the local seasonal rhythms of growing, becoming, and passing away” are essential for

post-capitalist thought addressing sustainability and justice [11, p. 7]. This highlights the inextricable link between human well-being and ecological integrity, a core tenet missing from growth-centric models.

Redefining economic value: beyond market hegemony and extractivism At the core of the contemporary environmental and care crises lies the invisibility of vital life cycles—both natural and those within households, where the majority of unpaid care work occurs. Feminist economic thought directly confronts this by rejecting the conventional market-centric view of the economy. It explicitly refutes the premise that economic analysis should solely focus on market relations, instead centering human well-being and bringing previously invisibilized spheres of the economic system to the forefront. These spheres encompass work predominantly performed by women, paid or unpaid, tasks crucial for emotional and affective balance, and the overall reproduction of society [64–66]. The traditional neoclassical paradigm, by focusing on production and market exchange, has systematically relegated care work to the “non-economic,” leading to its profound devalorization [67, p. 42]. This narrow perspective, which views only market-mediated activities as productive, overlooks the complex needs traditionally met through unpaid work and the gendered division of labor. Furthermore, this market hegemony often reinforces extractivist models of production and consumption, where natural resources are exploited without valuing the ecological degradation or the social costs to communities, particularly in the Global South. Degrowth, by challenging the imperative for constant accumulation, directly confronts this extractivist logic, advocating for a fundamental shift in values to prioritize regeneration and reciprocity over exploitation and depletion [3, 5, 22].

From capital-labor to capital-life conflict: revaluing consumption and systemic transformation Intersectional perspectives account for diverse factors of oppression [68, pp. 93–118], understanding how global care organization generates inequalities. Degrowth navigates between an “ethics of constraint” (highlighting limits and threats) and an “ethics of abundance” (reconceptualizing ‘winning’ as non-material flourishing) [69], with ethics of care articulating the latter promise. This promise is directly linked to a fundamental shift in societal values, moving away from the prevailing emphasis on material consumption and towards recognizing the value of sufficiency, quality of life, and human relationships. Degrowth challenges the notion that more consumption equates to more well-being, instead proposing that reduced material throughput can lead to a richer, more fulfilling existence by prioritizing activities that are inherently valuable rather than those that are merely economically productive. This re-evaluation of consumption values is central to its transformative potential.

This is particularly critical because degrowth will not unfold equally given existing power relations and unequal starting positions. A degrowth framework guided by a justice-oriented approach to equality of outcomes must inform political strategies, whether these involve integrating degrowth policies within the capitalist system or pursuing its radical transformation. In either scenario, changes in production and consumption are not gender-neutral; they are shaped by gendered organizations and institutions, perpetuating inter- and intra-gender intersectional inequalities. This includes crucial territorial

disparities between affluent regions and those structurally impoverished, reflected in differing positions across global GDP, HDI, and various gender indicators.

When degrowth is associated with a fundamental transformation of capitalism, its analytical focus shifts decisively from the traditional capital-labor conflict to the more encompassing capital-life conflict. This profound re-framing is central to both degrowth and rupturist feminist economics, which similarly identify the core antagonism as between capital accumulation and the conditions for sustaining life on the planet. Both advocate for a profound systemic shift, proposing a new economic model that decisively places the sub-sphere of care at its center, rather than merely attempting to integrate into or reform existing market principles [70].

Substantial progress in gender equality and sustainability is impossible without directly and coherently confronting the structural gender inequalities stemming from the gendered division of labor and the unjust social organization of care. Investing in the care economy, by mitigating existing structural imbalances and the excessive burden on women as primary caregivers, can generate a virtuous circle that improves and amplifies care provision. This re-positions life at the center of analysis, ensuring that care revolves around ‘buen vivir’ (good living)—a life truly worth living.

This re-signification highlights the multidimensionality of life’s sustainability and care networks, dignifying women’s essential role within them [63]. Addressing the current dual crisis of care for both people and the environment urgently demands the transformation of industrial processes to achieve this very recoupling of economy, ecology, and society, necessitating the application of complex system thinking to fully grasp the intricate interconnections within socio-ecological systems [41].

Indeed, mainstreaming gender and sustainability jointly is recognized as a key strategy, though “there seem to be no blueprints but complex processes of policy-making and implementation at multi-level governance, where leadership, financial support and, in particular, combined gender strategies (mainstreaming and positive actions) with a transformational approach has been crucial in caring for people and the environment simultaneously” [71, pp. 258–271].

In this context, there is a clear mandate to accelerate towards economic, climate, and gender justice, transitioning towards a society of care that prioritizes the sustainability of life and the preservation of natural heritage, supported by feminist information systems and methodologies that fully integrate and value all dimensions of care.

3 Methodology: a framework for engendering degrowth

This study employs a qualitative and analytical research approach to examine the operationalization of degrowth principles in Europe. The methodology is based on a systematic review of existing initiatives and policies, selected for their diversity and relevance in the practical implementation of degrowth. The objective of this study is to evaluate their transformative capacity through a critical lens. Central to this methodological approach is a perspective rooted in feminist economics and the ethics of care, which allows for the reinterpretation and expansion of the degrowth debate. This specifically involves questioning degrowth as a transformation of the capitalist economic system, overcoming gender gaps derived from anthropocentrism and patriarchy at meso, macro, and micro levels (inter- and intra-gender).

To structure this analysis, we utilize the Transformative Capacity Framework (TCF) proposed by Vrettos, Hinton, and Pereira [1], which has been fundamentally enriched with an explicit gender perspective. This adaptation allows for the detailed analysis of each initiative and policy, and a critical examination of how the principles of degrowth, gender, care, and justice manifest in practice and the challenges they face, using a thematic analysis guided by the TCF's elements (E):

E1. Degrowth Goals and Visions with Equity: Articulating a Life-Centered Future. This first element emphasizes moving beyond economic growth, pursuing human and planetary well-being within ecological limits [2, 13, 27]. It is a paradigm shift. Degrowth visions must be transformative, prioritizing care over accumulation [62, 70]. Feminist economics places care and justice at degrowth's core [66, 70]. Visions must be intersectional, eliminating discrimination (SDG 5) [50], including Global South and indigenous worldviews [4]. A genuine transformative capacity requires a deep cultural and normative shift towards an ethics of sufficiency, moving away from extractivist ideologies that have molded growth and gendered inequalities.

E2. Empowerment and Transformative Learning: Fostering a New Mindset. In this pillar, empowerment and learning merge with the explicit purpose of driving social transformation towards degrowth, cultivating knowledge through experimentation and political participation [12, 29]. The gender perspective expands this element by understanding empowerment as the capacity to dismantle “gender systems” that have limited roles [49], validating the knowledge and practices of women and marginalized groups (care, local production) [62, 71]. Learning must be horizontal and dialogical, incorporating lived experiences [68]. In this context, degrowth is intrinsically linked to the construction of a new mindset, which we call “utopian mindset”. This is not a passive vision, but an active process of social reinvention, individual imagination, and collective visioning. It is nourished by the capacity to collectively unlearn dominant paradigms, build new agency that challenges power structures for an equitable distribution of knowledge, and design sustainable futures through internal and external inspiration [72]. For this task, the theory of Ecomindsponge [73] and the concept of Sustainability Mindset [74] emerge as crucial tools. The Ecomindsponge offers a model for understanding how the human mind can deviate from ecological reality, ignoring the value of care and the finitude of resources, which creates a fundamental disconnection between our economy and ecology. For its part, the Sustainability Mindset proposes a path to correct this deviation through principles of systems thinking and emotional intelligence, which allows individuals and collectives to manifest an “eco-superplus culture” that values well-being above material accumulation [75]. This approach aligns with our thesis that the growth model has operated under a mindset that has systematically ignored these values. This element is also nourished by the development of the “Nature Quotient” (NQ) [76], understood as the capacity to perceive the interconnectedness with ecological systems. A collective mindset that has cultivated a high NQ is, in turn, what enables the transition toward Goals and Visions with Equity (E1) through the manifestation of an “eco-surplus culture” [74], a societal paradigm that values well-being and ecological health above material accumulation. This framework is designed to demonstrate that these mechanisms are not gender-neutral but are intrinsically linked to the struggle for justice and the revaluation of care, which constitutes the main contribution of this work.

E3. Just Resource Flows with Gender Equity: Re-evaluating Value and Distribution. This element manages equitable resource flows (financial, labor, time, and material) within environmental limits [3, 24]. Feminist economics highlights unjust resource distribution via exploitation of women's unpaid labor [67, 70]. "Just flows" imply a radical revaluation of this work (SDG 5.4), promoting work-sharing, reduced hours, and decent wages [77]. Local reinvestment should improve community quality of life, addressing gender and intersectionalities, empowering women with equal access to economic resources (SDG 5.a) [71]. Gender Mainstreaming (GM) here analyzes resource impact on genders, correcting inequalities [78]. For degrowth to be just, resource re-allocation must challenge extractivism and accumulation, redistributing wealth to marginalized communities, dismantling colonial legacies. It implies shifting from capital accumulation to sufficiency and well-being.

E4. Democratic and Intersectional Governance: Re-imagining Power and Decision-Making. This element promotes participatory, transparent, multi-stakeholder governance, based on collective ownership for the common good [79]. Degrowth governance, with a gender perspective, must be profoundly intersectional, dismantling patriarchal and colonial power structures [68, 80]. It is fundamental to incorporate the perspectives of women, indigenous communities, and the Global South [4]. Effective Gender Mainstreaming (GM) avoids "technocratization" [87], fostering inclusive deliberation for intersectionality [68], and giving voice to radical and transformative proposals [86]. Collective ownership ensures equitable benefits. A greater presence of women in decision-making correlates with climate mitigation (SDG 5.5) [71]. True transformative capacity requires shifting from hierarchical and exclusionary governance models to truly participatory and inclusive ones, centralizing diverse needs and knowledge, and confronting the power dynamics that perpetuate extractivism and inequalities.

E5. Network Building for Transformative Solidarity: Fostering Interconnection and Resilience. This final element focuses on inter-initiative connections for mutual support and the amplification of their impact [81]. The construction of networks for transformative solidarity links degrowth, gender, and social justice initiatives [71]. These networks share strategies that challenge gender norms, highlight care work, and build care economies that operate outside capitalist logics [41, 62]. "Counter-hegemonic alternative networks" empower marginalized groups beyond exploitative capitalist processes [82]. Effective Gender Mainstreaming (GM) in networks integrates gender analysis, fostering a "complex equality" [83, 84]. "Twin-track approaches" combine mainstreaming strategies with targeted actions for gender equality [71, 83, 84]. Robust networks are critical for fostering collective learning, diffusing transformative practices, and building political power against the growth paradigm. They nurture solidarity economies and a vision of "degrowth with equity", where care and justice are central, and where "engendered degrowth" is conceived as an indispensable approach to build a habitable future for all.

This integrated framework, enriched by feminist economics and the ethics of care, underscores that degrowth must be a radically just and feminist socio-ecological transformation. This requires a profound paradigm shift, moving from a capital-centered economy to a life-centered future and a new mindset. Through social reinvention, individual imagination, and collective visioning, this approach demonstrates how it is possible to design sustainable futures. In this sense, "engendered degrowth" is positioned as the indispensable approach to coherently address gender inequality, placing care and

justice at the core of this transformation and building a habitable future for all people and for the planet.

4 Findings: practical implementations and research milestones in degrowth

This section presents key findings from degrowth's practical implementation and recent advancements in degrowth-related research. It applies the analytical framework detailed in Sect. 4 (Methodology) to evaluate the transformative capacity of niche initiatives operating within the contemporary socio-ecological crisis context, paying particular attention to how these initiatives foster social justice, community well-being, and a re-centering of care for people and the planet.

4.1 Practical degrowth implementations

Practical degrowth implementations in Europe demonstrate how socio-ecological transformation can be rooted in local communities and manifest through diverse initiatives, operating as “community economies” and “radical alternatives” that show “post-capitalism is not something to be conjured in the future but is already here” [11]. These examples highlight feasible paths toward sustainability and social well-being, uncoupled from growth, by demonstrating local resilience and resource reduction. They often embody an economy centered on care, which reflects the Equity-Informed Goals and Visions (Element 1) of our methodological framework.

The following are representative cases examined to illustrate how the elements of the Transformative Capacity Framework manifest in practice, addressing the relevance of degrowth in various European contexts and revealing the implications of gender, care, and justice:

Renewable Energy Cooperatives (RECs) play a crucial role in implementing the energy transition by facilitating collective initiatives that foster civic engagement in energy management [85]. Customers frequently become prosumers, producing and consuming a portion of their energy [86]. This active participation exemplifies Empowerment and Transformative Learning (Element 2), building collective capacity. Organizations like REScoop.eu support RECs, advocating for energy democracy as a bottom-up approach aligned with the decentralization and community control of degrowth [81, 87]. By fostering shared responsibility and mutual benefit in energy supply, RECs inherently promote a collective care ethic, which contrasts with centralized, profit-oriented models, thereby embodying Just Resource Flow with Gender Equity (Element 3) and Democratic and Intersectional Governance (Element 4). Despite scalability challenges, their success lies in demonstrating that collective ownership models can strengthen local resilience and social justice, a central principle of degrowth.

Eco-communities represent planned residential settlements embodying the degrowth philosophy by striving for ecologically responsible, self-sufficient living via sustainable energy and unconventional economies [88]. These communities, such as the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland [89] and Tamera in Portugal [90–92], serve as living laboratories for alternative societal organizations, directly reflecting Goals and Visions with Equity (Element 1). These initiatives are a practical manifestation of the “utopian mindset” and “collective visioning” that are central to our framework (Element 2), showing how communities can actively design a life-centered future beyond the growth paradigm. While

successful as niche examples, a significant limitation of eco-communities is their limited replicability to broader societal scales.

Island Projects (El Hierro and Tilos): El Hierro, in the Canary Islands, sought energy self-sufficiency [103]. Its hydro-wind power plant consistently covers over 50% of annual demand, aligning with Equity-Informed Goals and Visions (Element 1) [94, 95]. However, residents did not see a proportional decrease in their electricity costs due to uniform price regulation [93]. This limitation is critical for degrowth, as it highlights how the benefits of resource independence can be captured by growth-oriented markets rather than being distributed to local populations. This restricts transformative potential by not fully integrating Just Resource Flow with Gender Equity (Element 3), underscoring the need for supportive policies. This case illustrates the risk of “green” initiatives that achieve technical goals but fail in distributive justice. Meanwhile, Tilos, a Greek island, made a successful transition to renewable energy [93]. Its system reduced CO₂ emissions and electricity prices, demonstrating Just Resource Flow (Element 3) [93]. The success of Tilos was due to local governance and direct economic benefits, which offer concrete lessons for equitable resource management. Both projects illustrate the importance of combining technical innovation with regulatory and governance frameworks that prioritize the equitable distribution of benefits, a crucial component for a just degrowth transition.

4.2 Research milestones

The discourse of degrowth/post-growth has gained ground in academia/policy, redefining economic progress and well-being, scaffolding transformative capacity for justice, community, and re-centering care. In this context, a critical milestone is the rise of a new “utopian mindset” [72] and initiatives like the “Living Society Summit” in May 2025. These movements, by focusing on collective healing and the creation of supportive spaces, demonstrate how the psychological and cultural shifts needed for degrowth are being put into practice. This approach complements major research and political milestones, showing that the transformation towards a life-centered future is happening at multiple levels, from grassroots movements to academic projects.

A “Post-Growth Deal” (ERC grant, ICTA-UAB/UNIL) is a €10 M interdisciplinary project launched in 2022 that explores strategies for transitioning from growth to a system safeguarding social well-being/planetary sustainability [96]. It embodies re-evaluating Goals and Visions (Element 1), addressing systemic changes, fostering Empowerment (Element 2) via tools like “money games” [97]. It includes valuing unpaid care work [98], informing Just Resource Flows (Element 3) and challenging capitalist structures [99].

The “Beyond Growth 2023” conferences (European Parliament, Brussels) elevated post-growth ideas [100], gaining support from President Metsola [101]. They articulated a post-growth EU vision harmonizing welfare/development/planetary boundaries [100, 102]. Degrowth was explicitly introduced for a steady-state economy, redefining Goals and Visions (Element 1) [100]. Reports from JRC [51, 52] and UN Special Rapporteur [103, 104] discuss “inclusive wellbeing” and “poverty beyond growth,” resonating with feminist degrowth and Just Resource Flows (Element 3).

Research on gender/sustainability enriches degrowth discourse. Mainstreaming gender/sustainability in local government offers insights into Democratic Governance (Element 4) and Just Resource Flows (Element 3) [71]. Lundgren and Kronsell's [104] intersectional analysis of climate policy in Umeå, exploring nature identification and gender spill-over, contributes to a nuanced understanding of how gender dynamics shape environmental outcomes and policy effectiveness. This research is vital for fostering Empowerment (Element 2) by revealing subtle biases and pathways for more equitable engagement in socio-ecological transformations. These contributions underline the imperative of moving beyond simple inclusion to achieve genuine, systemic shifts, strengthening Goals and Visions (Element 1).

Degrowth narrative framing Public perception and acceptance of degrowth are significantly shaped by its narrative framing. Sagvosdkin [44] highlights two discursive strategies: a “threat” narrative—emphasizing limitations and lack of “win-win” under capitalism—and a “promise” narrative—reconceptualizing ‘winning’ as non-material flourishing and abundance [44]. Understanding this dialectic is crucial for fostering clarity in the degrowth community and improving public engagement, reflecting efforts in Empowerment and Transformative Learning (Element 2). Feminist degrowth, by emphasizing the “promise” through valuing care and solidarity, directly challenges “threat” narratives, thus shaping Goals and Visions with Equity (Element 1).

Gender dynamics in media reporting Analysis of media reporting reveals significant asymmetry in degrowth coverage [44]. A Sagvosdkin [44] survey indicates negative reporting (43%) dominates positive (27%). Negative articles are more frequent in conservative media's ‘Economy’ sections, predominantly by men. Conversely, positive articles appear more in progressive media's ‘Environment’ sections and are often by women. This gender disparity highlights structural barriers to positive mainstream media discourse, showing how the dominant economic paradigm (criticized by degrowth and feminist economics) is reinforced via biased communication channels. This exposes challenges for Democratic and Intersectional Governance (Element 4) in the public sphere, underscoring the need for media literacy and transdisciplinary collaboration for a balanced debate, promoting Empowerment (Element 2).

Institutionalization within academia The term “degrowth” has evolved into a recognized field. The Degrowth Journal (July 2023) is a dedicated platform clarifying ambiguities and challenging profit-driven publishing. Special issues in established journals [56, 105] further mark its academic acceptance. A recent bibliometric review confirms that while research on degrowth has historically been limited, there has been a significant increase in publications in recent years, aligning with growing environmental concerns and a heightened emphasis on sustainable development goals [72]. This academic legitimacy strengthens Network Building (Element 5) and fosters shared Goals/Visions (Element 1) and Empowerment/Learning (Element 2).

From academic discourse to a living social movement The “Living Society Summit,” held in May 2025 and gathering 45 pioneers, marked a key milestone toward strengthening socio-ecological movements. Although the term “degrowth” was not explicitly used, the summit emphasized that successful transformation depends on collective healing and

creating supportive spaces. Initiatives like the “utopian mindset” provide crucial frameworks for action, viewing challenges as opportunities to shape the future enthusiastically. Methods such as Upstateing for personal wellbeing and Utopian Loading for idea generation underscore that true change begins within individuals, turning utopia from an abstract notion into daily practice. These approaches reflect the ethos of movements like Reinventing Society, which advocate a paradigm shift toward justice, sustainability, and systemic participation [26, 72].

5 Discussion

This research, by applying a Gender-Informed Transformative Capacity Framework, reveals a multifaceted landscape concerning the conceptualization, implementation, and policy of degrowth in Europe. It has been observed that, while the term “degrowth” continues to be avoided in official EU discourse, its fundamental principles (equitable reduction of consumption and production, prioritization of well-being, and respect for ecological limits) are increasingly reflected in grassroots initiatives and academic and political debates. This indicates a shift, though often implicit, towards the Goals and Visions with Equity (Element 1) that underpin the transformative framework, which explicitly seeks a deeper socio-ecological transformation.

Practical examples (RECs, Eco-communities, island projects like El Hierro and Tilos) demonstrate feasible pathways towards local resilience and reduced resource dependence. These initiatives embody the ethics of care, fostering communal provisioning and holistic well-being. RECs empower energy democratization, and eco-communities serve as living laboratories for alternative social organizations, demonstrating the viability of prioritizing human and ecological regeneration. While island cases highlight the technical feasibility of energy transition, they also expose the insufficiency of regulatory frameworks if they do not translate ecological benefits into equitable socio-economic advantages for local populations (as seen in El Hierro). Conversely, Tilos’s integrated success in reducing emissions, prices, and waste, thanks to robust community participation, deeply resonates with feminist economics’ emphasis on distributive justice and the socialization of benefits, showing how transition gains can directly contribute to community well-being and environmental care. All these cases illustrate how the framework’s elements, such as Empowerment and Transformative Learning (Element 2), Just Resource Flows with Gender Equity (Element 3), and Democratic and Intersectional Governance (Element 4), manifest and are challenged in practice.

On the research front, milestones like the “Post-Growth Deal” and “Beyond Growth 2023” reflect a growing academic and political commitment to redefining economic progress. The explicit inclusion of valuing unpaid care work and the movement towards well-being metrics beyond GDP validate the influence of feminist critiques in economic thought, broadening the notion of “progress”. This intellectual advancement directly contributes to Empowerment and Transformative Learning (Element 2) within research communities.

However, challenges persist. EU frameworks adhere to green growth, avoiding a fundamental challenge to the continuous expansion imperative. These policies fail to address the deeper systemic drivers of unsustainability and inequality. A critical, yet often under-discussed, obstacle to degrowth at national and European levels is the profound influence of geopolitical forces and the entrenched global petro-capitalist system [2, 3, 17].

Global powers remain heavily invested in the continued expansion of resource-intensive economies, relying on a system that prioritizes fossil fuel extraction and unrestricted production [17]. This reliance creates significant resistance to policies advocating for a planned reduction in consumption and material throughput, making the implementation of comprehensive degrowth strategies particularly challenging [16]. The pursuit of degrowth inherently implies a confrontation with these established interests and a shift away from a globalized, extractivist economic model. However, by emphasizing relocalization, reduced dependence on global supply chains, and fostering regional self-sufficiency, degrowth offers a path toward greater national and European sovereignty and resilience against these destabilizing geopolitical dynamics, even if it necessitates directly challenging the existing paradigm [16].

Degrowth and the 2030 Agenda share the challenge of transforming global management frameworks [106]. Both converge on broadening sustainability beyond efficiency to include socio-ecological resilience and distributive justice, demanding greater accountability and strengthening participatory governance for collective well-being within planetary boundaries, thus challenging logics prioritizing unlimited economic growth over planetary habitability and social equity. From a feminist degrowth perspective, policies must go beyond “decoupling” to actively dismantle structures perpetuating gendered inequalities and undervaluing care work, promoting investments in life-sustaining sectors over extractivist or growth-at-all-costs models. The Circular Economy, while valuable for material efficiency, needs to be consciously infused with an ethics of care to be genuinely transformative, focusing on “loops of care” rather than optimizing capitalist production.

In this vein, the profound transformation that is envisioned in these conceptual shifts requires a rethinking of human psychology and cognition, a reconfiguration of the mind that allows us to see the world through a new lens. Here, the Transformative Capacity Framework, to which a gender perspective is added, is enriched by identifying the psychological and cultural mechanisms that power its elements. The theory of Ecomind-sponge [73] and the Sustainability Mindset [74] emerge as crucial tools for this. The Ecomindsponge offers a model for understanding how the human mind processes information and how the mental representation—or subjective sphere—of reality can deviate from the objective sphere of ecological reality, which leads to what the authors call “stupidity” and “delusion” in the relationship with nature. This notion is crucially aligned with the thesis: the economic growth model has operated under a mindset that has systematically ignored the value of care, non-market work, and the finitude of resources, creating a fundamental disconnection between the economy and ecology. The concept of Sustainability Mindset complements this vision by proposing a path to correct this deviation through its 12 principles of ecological vision, systems thinking, and emotional and spiritual intelligence. This mindset is the lens through which individuals and collectives can analyze information, make decisions, and, ultimately, manifest an eco-surplus culture [75].

Furthermore, grassroots initiatives demonstrate the practical application of these frameworks. Organizations like Reinventing Society, through its vision of a “living society” and cultivation of a “utopian mindset,” address the psychological and cultural shifts essential for a post-growth transition. Offering concrete methods for collective healing, fostering vitality, and promoting a mindset focused on potential rather than scarcity,

these movements bridge the gap between abstract psychological models and actionable community-level change. They show that transformative capacities, including transformative learning, network building, and democratic governance, depend deeply on individuals and communities embracing a new cognitive and emotional relationship with their environment and each other [26, 72].

This culture, which promotes sustainable norms and reorients social behavior, is the manifestation of a deep cognitive shift, intrinsically linked to the development of the Nature Quotient (NQ) [76], which explains how communities can learn, adapt, and empower themselves by perceiving their interconnectedness with ecological systems. Nevertheless, for these frameworks to be truly holistic and inclusive, they must be analyzed from a gender and intersectional perspective. The capacity to perceive the interconnectedness with nature (the NQ) and the transition toward a regenerative society are not gender-neutral. Previous studies have shown that women, due to their greater involvement in care work and their close relationship with the social and natural environment, tend to exhibit a greater ecological awareness. This suggests that the development of a high NQ can be influenced by gender roles and values. The ethics of care, which has been identified as the engine of a post-growth economy in work on the circular economy, is focused on revaluing non-market work and relationships of interdependence. This ethic is, by nature, the core of the eco-surplus culture that redefines prosperity. Therefore, it is argued that the revaluation of this type of work, historically feminized, is essential for the transition toward a degrowth society.

6 Conclusion and policy recommendations

This article has explored degrowth as a transformative concept, examining its theoretical foundations, contrasting it with alternative sustainability frameworks, analyzing its practical manifestations in Europe, and highlighting key research milestones. Our analysis, deeply informed by feminist economics and the ethics of care, reveals several critical insights into the feasibility and necessity of a post-growth transition through the lens of our Transformative Capacity Framework.

Firstly, degrowth is not merely a call for economic recession but a nuanced, equitable reduction of production and consumption, aiming for enhanced human and ecological well-being. It fundamentally challenges the growth imperative that underpins contemporary capitalism, contrasting sharply with frameworks like Green Growth, Circular Economy, and even the SDGs (due to their inherent growth dependency). Indeed, capitalism itself is characterized by “growth-oriented logics geared towards accumulation; and the exploitation along class, gender/sexuality, and racial lines and resulting inequalities” [11, p. 3]. The integration of feminist economics clarifies that a true degrowth transition must pivot from a capital-centric to a life-centered economy, recognizing the profound value of care work and the interdependence of social and ecological systems. As insights from ecofeminist political economy demonstrate, “social reproduction must be considered if both gender justice and ecological justice are to be achieved” [11, p. 15]. This reinforces and directly elaborates on the Goals and Visions with Equity (Element 1) necessary for transformation. This perspective is central to the analysis of exploitation and social reproduction, seeking to dismantle patriarchal, anthropocentric, and market structures from an intersectional perspective [62, 63, 68, 80].

Secondly, practical initiatives in Europe—from community-led energy cooperatives to pioneering eco-communities and island projects—demonstrate tangible pathways for implementing degrowth principles at local and regional scales. These examples underscore the importance of a deliberative, bottom-up degrowth approach, where local people actively participate as key actors, deciding the pace and design of degrowth. These initiatives embody collective responsibility and often prioritize community well-being and ecological stewardship, providing empirical evidence that sustainable and equitable living is not only desirable but achievable. Their successes, and sometimes challenges (e.g., El Hierro's electricity costs), demonstrate the critical role of supportive regulatory frameworks to translate ecological gains into direct social benefits, ensuring just transitions that benefit all members of society, not just economic elites. It is fundamental that this local perspective does not neglect the idea of care, justice, and gender approach, which are intrinsic elements for achieving Just Resource Flows with Gender Equity (Element 3) and effective Democratic and Intersectional Governance (Element 4) in practice.

Thirdly, the growing academic discourse and policy-level discussions, evidenced by large research grants like “A Post-Growth Deal” and conferences such as “Beyond Growth 2023”, signify a shift in mainstream recognition of post-growth ideas. Explicit valuation of unpaid care work and movement towards “well-being metrics” beyond GDP highlight feminist critiques’ influence, broadening “progress”. This intellectual advancement contributes directly to Empowerment and Transformative Learning (Element 2) within research communities. The emergence of dedicated platforms and specialized research, including on gender and sustainability, further strengthens Network Building for Transformative Solidarity (Element 5) within academia.

While degrowth remains a foundational framework emphasizing the imperative for a radical and systemic transformation of capitalist growth dynamics, contemporary discourse increasingly recognizes the broader conception of post-growth. This umbrella term includes diverse economic and social models aimed at prioritizing human well-being within planetary boundaries, such as steady-state economies, sufficiency, and doughnut economics. Post-growth discourse often adopts a more pragmatic stance, sometimes emphasizing reform within existing structures rather than revolutionary restructuring. However, both degrowth and post-growth converge fundamentally in their rejection of growth as a sustainable or desirable goal, highlighting the necessity of deep socio-ecological change grounded in social justice, care, and intersectionality. This evolving dialogue underscores the opportunities and challenges of engendering degrowth as a transformative, justice-infused strategy resonating with feminist and ecological ethics. Policy and cultural recommendations must navigate this nuanced terrain, leveraging the strengths of both paradigms to foster societies that value life over accumulation.

Fourth, degrowth, understood as a global transformation, demands an expanded territorial perspective considering regional realities and, fundamentally, the North-South dimension. To achieve true planetary justice, non-ethnocentric, degrowth processes in the Global North must inform and be informed by the need to dismantle colonial and extractivist relationships, recognizing historical and current responsibilities in resource consumption and emissions. A just degrowth approach cannot overlook development disparities and the differentiated impacts of socio-ecological crises, promoting cooperation and solidarity models prioritizing peoples’ sovereignty and equity in accessing

global commons. This vision is essential for ensuring Goals and Visions with Equity (Element 1) and Just Resource Flows with Gender Equity (Element 3) apply globally.

Finally, despite advances, the pervasive influence of the growth paradigm in EU legislative frameworks and the often-negative, gender-biased media framing of degrowth represent substantial barriers. The dominance of male voices in conservative media's 'Economy' sections shaping negative narratives underscores deep-seated biases within existing power structures. Overcoming this requires continuous academic rigor and policy advocacy, and a conscious effort to challenge patriarchal and neoliberal gatekeeping within media and economic discourse, amplifying diverse voices advocating for care-centered, justice-oriented alternatives. This is crucial for strengthening Democratic and Intersectional Governance (Element 4) and Empowerment and Transformative Learning (Element 2) in the public sphere.

The feasibility of a degrowth transition rests not only on policy and economic restructuring but fundamentally on a cultural and psychological transformation. Initiatives such as the "Living Society Summit" and the cultivation of a "utopian mindset" offer tangible evidence that this shift is already underway at the grassroots level. By prioritizing collective healing, vitality, and a redefinition of prosperity beyond material accumulation, these movements provide a practical methodology for individuals and communities to operationalize the abstract principles of degrowth. They serve as a powerful testament to the idea that a life-centered, gender-informed, and just society is not merely a theoretical construct but a desirable and achievable reality, forged through shared vision and collective action.

Achieving a genuine socio-ecological transformation towards degrowth necessitates a systemic shift that revalues care, promotes equity, and prioritizes collective well-being within planetary boundaries. While the path ahead is fraught with political and cultural challenges, the growing body of practical examples and robust research, increasingly informed by feminist economics and a territorial and global justice perspective, offers a compelling vision for a future where abundance is redefined not by material accumulation, but by the flourishing of life and the richness of human relationships. Indeed, there are significant resistances, often with a strong ideological and political charge, to advancing towards post-capitalist models that truly challenge the dominant paradigm. Further research and policy experimentation are needed to explore how these principles can be effectively scaled and integrated into resilient, caring, and just societies.

Finally, governments and policy-makers should support initiatives that bridge degrowth and post-growth visions, fostering innovation in community-led governance that emphasizes care, well-being, and ecological boundaries. This includes:

1. Foster community initiatives for a utopian mindset: Governments should establish a dedicated fund and simplified regulatory pathways to support the creation and growth of Renewable Energy Cooperatives and eco-communities. By promoting citizen participation and collective ownership, these initiatives serve as living laboratories for developing a utopian mindset and demonstrating the viability of a living society based on cooperation, collective healing, and local resilience.
2. Ensure just resource flows with a gender perspective: It is essential to create new regulatory frameworks to guarantee that the benefits of ecological transitions are distributed equitably, especially in regional projects. These policies must include mechanisms for democratic governance and community ownership to prevent the

privatization of gains, ensure benefits reach the most vulnerable populations, and address gender inequalities in access to resources and decision-making.

3. Promote transformative learning for a living society: Fostering a living society requires a multi-level approach that empowers individuals and communities to become agents of change by actively imagining, reinventing, and designing the future. This process goes beyond traditional educational institutions and involves a shift from a social model of loneliness, burnout, and trauma to one based on cooperation, vitality, and collective well-being. It can be achieved by using transformative learning methodologies that focus on the revaluation of care work, collective healing, and the development of ecological awareness. This approach is crucial for cultivating the psychological and cultural foundations necessary for broad public support for a life-centered engendering degrowth and post-growth transition.

Author contributions

I.P.J. conceived the study, conducted the research, wrote the manuscript, and reviewed the final version.

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