

Engendering Spatial Transformations – Mission Statement of the international ARL Forum ‘Gender and Spatial Transformation’

Executive Summary

The Forum Gender and Spatial Transformation of the ARL – Academy for spatial development in the Leibniz Association – is an international working group of experts from research, politics, and planning practice who address spatial inequalities with a particular focus on gender. This mission statement reflects the inter- and transdisciplinary approach and shared understanding that underpin the Forum's work.

The Forum aims to promote the exchange and cooperation between spatial research, politics, and planning practice, integrating socio-spatial perspectives and ecological issues. Committed to social-ecological justice in spatial development, the Forum seeks to provide impulses for all areas of its members' activities to contribute to more sustainable spatial transformations. The aim is to integrate existing knowledge more effectively into scientific, political, and planning processes, utilising various formats and networks to facilitate this integration.

The Forum advocates for taking inequalities, with a particular focus on gender, into account in all aspects of spatial planning and development. It calls on experts and policymakers to play an active role in shaping socio-ecological transformations and to ensure that the voices of marginalized and multiply discriminated groups are heard, in order to create a more sustainable and equitable future.

The Forum recognizes the complexity of gender conceptualizations: gender is understood not only as an individual characteristic, but also as a structural phenomenon that influences power relations in society, as well as its relations with nature and the environment. From an intersectional perspective, it is assumed that sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination do not exist in isolation from one another but rather overlap and strongly influence each other significantly. Approaches such as Gender+/Gender 2.0 also recognize that different social categories lead to multiple forms of exclusion. This broadens our understanding of social inequality and discriminatory power relations, providing valuable insights into how to overcome them. The Forum builds on feminist insights from the 1970s onwards, which have emphasized the impact of gender relations on social and ecological change, as well as the significance of diverse approaches and conceptualizations of gender perspectives.

The forum is based on the understanding that traditional gender roles influence how our socio-spatial and physical environments are shaped and structured: the social division between paid and unpaid work affects how spaces are conceived, used, and

designed. Space is understood not only as a product, but also as a constantly changing process shaped by relationships, uses, and appropriations. This complex understanding of space provides the foundation for approaches to socio-ecological transformation.

Existing economic and social systems must be critically examined if we are to achieve sustainable development. This is also relevant when it comes to tackling socio-ecological crises and the unequal economic foundations in communities, as well as the structural conditions required for more equitable living environments. In this context, it is important to consider different approaches: analytical approaches describe how structures are constituted and how medium- to long-term changes arise, while normative approaches formulate goals and values for desired changes. Both long-term strategic and short-term pragmatic approaches are required. The Forum is committed to achieving more sustainable spatial development that is based on intergenerational justice and integrates the various dimensions of sustainable development (ecological, economic and social).

1. Introduction: The Forum and its Mission

The international Forum Gender and Spatial Transformation of the ARL – Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association¹ – is an inter- and transdisciplinary working group consisting of international experts from research, policy, planning, development and implementation. Within our group, however, we are committed to critically reflecting on the binary divide between science and practice. We therefore consider science and practice to be a continuum, with different perspectives emerging, such as transformation-oriented research, applied research, and research-oriented planning practice. Our work covers a variety of thematic fields related to gender and spatial transformations, including urban planning and development, climate change mitigation and adaptation, circular building, energy and mobility transformations, digital transformations, the spatial aspects of care (e.g. caring cities and communities), as well as far right environmentalism.

Our Forum operates within and beyond the ARL. Following the ARL's inter- and transdisciplinary approach, it integrates expert knowledge on intersectional gender perspectives and spatial transformations. Normatively, we strive for socially and ecologically just spatial transformations towards sustainability. We aim to co-produce transdisciplinary knowledge at the intersection of spatial research, policy, planning, development and implementation practices. This approach is based on a critical, self-reflective and cooperative exchange and collaboration within and beyond our group. It is thus our mission to

- 1) develop a critical and emancipatory understanding of intersectional gender perspectives in spatial transformations,
- 2) highlight the contribution and added value of intersectional gender perspectives to the generation and application of knowledge for spatial transformations,
- 3) identify key actors, challenges and barriers to integrating intersectional gender perspectives into research, policy, planning, development and implementation practises; and
- 4) establish inter- and transdisciplinary implementation strategies for integrating intersectional gender perspectives into spatial research, policy, planning, development and implementation practices.

This requires an understanding of spatial transformations that

- understands transformations as spatial and relational processes that aim to bring about radical and transformative changes towards sustainability. This includes a critique of the existing capitalist economic system and all relations of superiority and subordination.
- distinguishes between different dimensions and depths of integrating intersectional gender perspectives into analysis (e.g. distinction between

¹ As an academy of selected members and a large network of committed experts, the ARL acts as a social research infrastructure in the Leibniz Association enabling inter- and transdisciplinary knowledge co-production and networking between research and planning practice. Normatively, the ARL aims for sustainable spatial development including social and economic justice as well as ecological responsibility.

individual, structural, procedural and epistemological perspectives), conceptualization (e.g. the formulation of normative goals and strategies for sustainable social-ecological systems) and implementation of spatial transformations (e.g. distinction between gender-sensitive and gender-transformative processes).

This Mission Statement takes a critical and emancipatory approach to understanding spatial transformations in two parts: First, it develops and illustrates the range of Forum's understandings of the key concepts *gender and intersectionality*, *space*, and *transformation*, while highlighting the connections and interlinkages between these concepts (Chapter 2). Second, the document explores how intersectional gender perspectives can inform system, target, and transformation knowledge as key foundations for just socio-ecological and spatial transformations, emphasizing collaborative, transdisciplinary approaches and inclusive planning practices (Chapter 3).

The Mission Statement outlines the inter- and transdisciplinary approach and exchange within the international Forum Gender and Spatial Transformation and aims to highlight the shared knowledge base that underpins our work within the ARL and beyond.

2. Understanding Key Concepts and Intersections

The following section develops and illustrates our understanding of the key concepts of *intersectional gender perspectives* (2.1), *space* (2.2), and *social-ecological spatial transformations* (2.3), focusing on the interrelations between these concepts.

2.1. Intersectional Gender Perspectives

Since the 1970s, the relevance of gender relations for social-ecological change has been illuminated by a wide range of feminist approaches (e.g. Merchant (1990) [1980]; Scheich/Schultz 1987; Haraway 1991; Hummel/Schultz 2011; for an overview see Arora-Jonsson (2014)). By positioning ourselves within this tradition, we aim to move beyond essentialist concepts of gender that tend to reinforce stereotypical understandings or dichotomous differences (ibid.).

We believe that studies drawing on and/or producing gender-disaggregated data to examine unequal responsibilities, vulnerabilities and perceptions are vital for highlighting and criticising discrimination and marginalization (Hofmeister/Katz/Mölders 2013a; Mölders 2017). However, our aim is to move beyond reductionist understandings of gender as merely an individual characteristic, instead highlighting the structural and systemic implications of gendered power relations (Hofmeister/Katz 2011; MacGregor 2017).

At the same time, we acknowledge the ambiguous nature of gender and recognise that there is no universal definition, not even within our group. Instead, gender has been interpreted in diverse ways (Kantola/Lombardo 2017). As an orientation, however, we refer to relevant systematizations in the field of gender relations and sustainability to

identify different analytical perspectives (Hofmeister/Katz 2011; Hofmeister/Katz/Mölders 2013b):

- i) *individuum*: identity-based dualisms and differentiations (e.g. gendered representation, inclusion, or vulnerabilities);
- ii) *structure*: societal institutions and organisation (e.g. the gendered division of labour);
- iii) *process*: individual performance and interactions (e.g. ‘doing gender’); and
- iv) *epistemology*: knowledge, symbols and discourses (e.g. gendered norms and representations) (see figure 1; Herdlitschka et al. 2024).

Although we reject the notion that gender relations are inherently or naturally determined, we also acknowledge that social inequalities are shaped by material realities such as bodies and spaces (Haraway 1991; Strüver 2019). Thus, in our Forum we therefore aim to analyse and understand the mutual entanglement and co-constitution of spatial development and gender relations as societal relations to nature (Hummel et al. 2017).

In light of the intertwining and mutual constitution of various mechanisms of inequality, we advocate for an intersectional conceptualization of gender relations and corresponding analytical perspectives (e.g. Herdlitschka et al. 2024). We follow the work of Black, postcolonial and queer feminist scholars and activists (e.g. Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2008; Combahee River Collective 1977; Davis 1981; hooks 2000; Lorde 2015; Mohanty 1984), who have considered how “race/ethnicity, class, disability, age, sexuality, religion, caste, and livelihood and migrant status” (Sultana 2021) intersect with gender to create complex patterns of inequality (Misra 2020). Recognising the interconnected nature of categories of difference, we emphasize that they can both reinforce and weaken each other (Winker/Degele 2011), resulting in unstable, contradictory dynamics (Mollett 2017).

We therefore refer to intersectionality as a „tool for critical thinking“(Kaijser/Kronsell 2014), which can strengthen the transformative and emancipatory aspects of our work and social-ecological transformation projects (Mikulewicz et al. 2023). Combining self-reflexivity (“looking inward”) and critical analysis (“looking outward”), enables us to reflect critically both on our own positioning/situatedness and on our research subjects (Lloro-Bidart/Finewood 2018).

2.2. The Role of Space in Social-Ecological Transformations

Understanding space and spatial relations is essential for analysing and promoting sustainability transformations. We therefore draw on conceptualisations from various scientific fields, such as spatial sciences, geography, sociology and planning theory. Within these disciplines, the prevailing understanding of space has shifted over time from positivist modes towards relational and social constructivist approaches (see e.g. Davoudi 2009, Davoudi 2012; Gottdiener 1994; Huning/Mölders/Zibell 2019; Levin-Keitel et al. 2018; Läßle 1991; Löw 2000; Massey 2005; Sturm 2000). While the former perspectives view space as an abstract object dimension, such as a surface or a container that can be filled or placed with materialities, the latter apply it as a category to explore relations and (contingent) interpretations (Huning/Mölders/Zibell 2019).

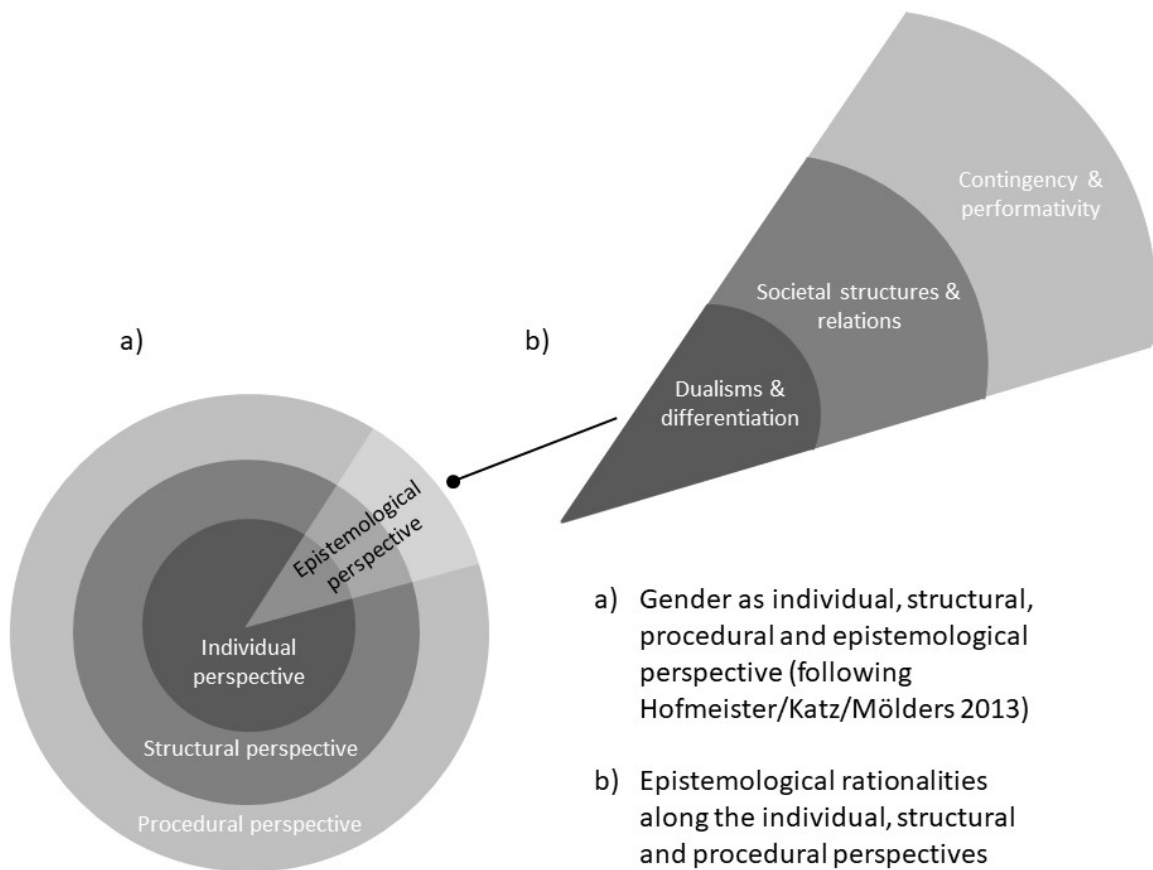


Figure 1: Gender perspectives as a) different analytical approaches (individual, structural, procedural and epistemological) and b) different epistemological rationalities. Source: Herdlitschka et al. 2024.

Rooted in these relational and constructivist traditions, we conceptualise space in terms of three interrelated dimensions:

- i) *a physical-material dimension*, recognizing space as a conceived, imagined and conceptualized product which becomes visible, for example, in maps, scenarios and plans,
- ii) *a social-common dimension*, understanding space as a lived process shaped by social relations, uses and appropriations and as the result of imaginaries and meanings, and
- iii) *a representational dimension*, recognizing space as a perceived, observed and experienced object linked to an individual's need for identification, symbols, identities and possibilities of appropriation (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]).

Building on the understanding of space as a relational concept ('societal relations to space', see Mölders 2017), we thus understand space as a socially constituted process that integrates both the material-physical dimension (e.g. nature, ecosystems and the built environment) with the symbolic-discursive dimension (society, social relations and discourse).

To describe such processes of spatial constitution and appropriation based on personal and societal relations with nature and space – including perception and identification – which produce (spatial) constellations, we refer to concepts such as

“Spacing” (Löw/Sturm 2005) and “Doing Space” (Gottschalk/Kersten/Kraemer 2018). In doing so, we emphasise their interconnectedness with other process categories (Huning/Mölders/Zibell 2019), such as gender, nature, race, class and sexuality (see the debates on un-/doing gender and difference, e.g. West/Zimmerman 1987; West/Fenstermaker 1995; Butler 2004). For example, gendered power relations influence and structure our social-ecological and socio-spatial environments and thus are crucial in terms of spatial planning and development (Mitrović/Voigt 2025). This means that dualisms based on gender – e.g. the division of paid and unpaid labour – influence spatial processes and structures by aligning them with unrealistic and – from a sustainability perspective – undesirable ideals such as the 'separation of functions' or the 'separation of private and public spaces' (Huning/Mölders/Zibell 2019). However, 'gender does NOT act alone' (Mollett/Faria 2013: 123), but rather different systems of power intersect when spaces are being produced, experienced and conceptualised (Mollett/Faria 2018). We therefore adopt a perspective that recognises the mutual constitution of space and multiple power relations as the basis of our understanding.

We consider spatial processes and structures to be constantly changing, evolving alongside the dynamic relationships between people and their specific contexts. At the same time, we acknowledge that these spatial dimensions also determine how different groups of people can appropriate and use them. Our conceptualisation of transformations as comprehensive, socio-economic, political and socio-cultural processes reflects this emphasis on the relational character of spatial development and socially shaped processes.

Due to the simultaneous occurrence of multiple and heterogeneous social interpretations, spaces also express the possibility of plurality and overlap and mutually reinforcing forms of coexistence (Massey 2005). It is precisely for this reason, that we view all spaces, from national territories to the micro-spaces of everyday life, as open and indeterminate with regard to future (trans)formations. Furthermore, we believe that collective and everyday interactions that are an active part of lived socio-spatial networks, become possible in and through space. This includes the possibility of conflict as a fundamental feature of the political production of space, which requires a platform open to diversity and different modes of appropriation – and thus dissent (Jacobs 1961).

2.3 Emancipatory Perspectives on Social-Ecological Transformations

Over the last decade, *transformation* has become one of the most prevalent concepts in contemporary debates on sustainability (Blythe et al. 2018). This development has been referred to as “transformative turn” in sustainability research (e.g. Horcea-Milcu et al. 2024). Following Schneidewind and Augenstein (2016), we argue that, due to its various conceptual understandings, transformation could act as “a boundary object for different disciplinary perspectives as well as for the strategies and action frameworks of non-academic actors” (Schneidewind/Augenstein 2016: 88). In view of the ARL’s transdisciplinary approach, which aims to integrate the perspectives of science, politics and planning practice on spatial development, this stance is highly relevant.

However, there is a wide range of approaches to *transformation* in sustainability science, which is quite complex to navigate. Blythe et al. (2018) suggest the following systematization:

- i) transitions approaches focusing on socio-technical transitions towards more sustainable futures (e.g. Geels/Schot 2007; Lorbach 2010),
- ii) sustainability pathways approaches emphasizing human development, justice, ecological sustainability, and institutional change (e.g. Leach et al. 2012),
- iii) social-ecological transformation approaches conceptualizing transformation in relation to resilience, system properties, and feedback loops (e.g. Moore et al. 2014; Olsson/Galaz/Boonstra et al. 2014), and
- iv) transformative adaptation approaches critiquing fundamental structures, marginalization, and inequality (e.g. Eriksen/Nightingale/Eakin 2015; O'Brien 2012).

By analysing various critiques of growth, including ecological, feminist, anti-capitalist, South-North and others, Schmelzer/Vetter (2021) extract three levels or strategies of transformations that can, and indeed must, take be implemented simultaneously:

- First, bottom-up strategies, such as experimental collective forms of life which, for example, transform open space by introducing commons at the local level.
- Second, top-down strategies, which enable change through reform policies at the local/municipal, regional/federal or national/ supranational level.
- Third, radical strategies (“Bruchstrategien”), breaking with existing ways of production and living through general strikes, occupations, revolutions or socialization of the means of production and democratization processes (also in spatial planning) (Schmelzer/Vetter 2021).

As stated at the outset, in our Forum, we conceptualize transformations as comprehensive spatial and relational processes that aim to bring about radical change towards sustainability. This understanding is rooted in an intersectional feminist perspective that critiques of the existing capitalist economic system and all other relations of superiority and subordination. Within this understanding, we distinguish between analytical and normative approaches (Brand 2014):

- Analytical approaches, which aim to generate systemic knowledge and examine how (social-ecological) transformations are shaped and organized in society, focusing particularly on materialities, discourses, actors, institutions, and processes.
- Normative approaches, on the other hand, aim to generate target knowledge and critically examine the normative orientation of (social-ecological) transformation processes.

In our Forum, we focus on the normative concepts of sustainable development as set out in the Brundtland Report (Brundtland 1987), which aim to achieve intergenerational and intragenerational justice. Furthermore, we emphasize a normative understanding of sustainability transformations as multifaceted, multi-level processes involving radical societal changes and ruptures. From a critical perspective, current social-ecological transformations do not sufficiently address intersectional gender perspectives and tend to (re)produce patriarchal, racialized and economic power relations and inequalities.

Therefore, a critical approach aimed at equitable transformations necessarily requires "questioning the fundamental principles on which our societies are based" and "entails the deconstruction of capitalist modernity or elements of it, as well as the construction of post-capitalist realities" (Feola/Vincent/Moore 2021: 1f). This also includes addressing the crisis of the reproductive or socio-ecological reproduction and dealing with the economic foundations of coexistence and the conditions and structures necessary for just living environments. This Forum therefore examines theoretical approaches and concepts, such as '(re)productivity' (Biesecker/Hofmeister 2015), and spatial approaches to caring communities and a caring society (Zibell 2022), in the sense of 'caring urbanism'. Against this background, not only analytical and normative, but also strategic and pragmatic approaches are of great importance in debates about sustainability transformations. Similarly, researchers of the former International Working Group "Gender in Spatial Development" at the ARL emphasise the importance of practical gender needs and strategic gender interests (Horelli/Damyhanovic 2019; Zibell/Damyhanovic/Sturm 2019).

In conclusion, we aim to foster transformative spatial change by placing intersectional gender perspectives at the centre of our activities, criticising power dynamics and domination, and unfolding non-dichotomous perspectives on space, actors and work. At the same time, our notion of spatial structures as open and indeterminate expressions of pluralities in organising coexistence parallels the idea of transformations being shaped by multiple actors, multifaceted social relations, and multi-scale interventions – from the local to the supranational and vice versa.

3. Engendering Knowledge in Social-Ecological Transformations

Social-ecological transformations become visible and empirically tangible in spaces. They are determined by societal structures, particularly gender relations, which are always interwoven with other systems of power. To navigate these transformations, we address different forms of knowledge that underpin sustainable spatial transformations (e.g. Wuelser/Pohl/Hirsch Hadorn 2012):

System knowledge encompasses descriptive, yet critical and reflective analyses of existing social-ecological and thus spatial systems and subsystems, such as cities, villages, regions and neighbourhoods, addressing knowledge gaps and operationalizing questions regarding societal relations to nature. It may include, for example, spatial and statistical inventories or object analyses.

Target knowledge entails formulating normative goals, including visions and concepts for changing social-ecological systems and spatial processes, that address intersectional justice and criticise power relations and domination. Target knowledge cannot be generated without considering values and framework legislation. It encompasses new forms of subsistence, changing modes of production, new urban-rural relationships and the governance of spaces and landscapes.

In developing an understanding of how to implement sustainable and equitable spatial development, *transformation knowledge* builds both on critical (historical) analyses and

normative visions of desirable futures. It is therefore principally action-orientated, involving methods, instruments and processes from research, policy, planning, development and implementation practices, while critically reflecting on them and referencing gender planning at all levels of planning and development processes, including system analysis and formulation of normative goals. Transformation knowledge considers diverse stakeholders, including residents and organisations representing local and supra-local interests of people, economy and society, flora and fauna, space and soil, climate and environment.

We are convinced that integrating intersectional gender perspectives is indispensable for generating transformative *system*, *target* and *transformation knowledge*, which is a prerequisite for initiating and fostering sustainable spatial development. In this sense, intersectional gender perspectives on spatial transformations can be understood as an inter- and transdisciplinary dimension of integration and implementation (Zibell/Damyranovic/Sturm 2019) that should be applied to every development/planning concept and process. This encompasses using the aforementioned forms of knowledge strategically and pragmatically to ensure that specific development and planning projects foster just and equitable outcomes: While target knowledge, on the one hand, which is based on system knowledge, must therefore be incorporated into the development of spatial concepts and implementation strategies, transformation knowledge, on the other hand, is useful for assembling task packages and deriving steps to implement context-specific and needs-oriented measures. In the process of moving from conceptual thinking to strategic intent and pragmatic action, the initial conceptual considerations must be reviewed and, ideally, refined through practical application. Thus, research and its questions benefit from experience derived from practical application and implementation. In the complex field of application, numerous stakeholders are involved, and planning experts, for example, must navigate different spheres of action and actors' networks with their distinct and divergent logics. Consequently, the scientific community must also cultivate a closer collaboration and exchange with planning experts, e.g. to generate and co-design research questions informed by spatial planning and development implementation practice (transdisciplinarity).

Against this background, we believe it is crucial to highlight the specific ways in which intersectional gender perspectives are incorporated into the various steps of action and to communicate them as essential prerequisites for just social-ecological transformations. Without conscious commitment and efforts towards intersectional gender justice, existing power relations will result in knowledge and planning efforts that perpetuate, rather than rectify, structural inequalities (Bauer/Frölich v. Bodelschwingh 2017). This requires awareness of and counteracting structural challenges of representing and integrating marginalised perspectives and approaches in/into the production of all three forms of knowledge, as well as in planning processes. Therefore, to address intersectional relations of inequality in spatial transformation projects, marginalized groups, including women*, the LGBTQIA+ community, low-income earners, and migrants, must be actively empowered to participate meaningfully and have their voices heard. This includes strengthening bottom-up initiatives, taking ownership of top-down processes, supporting innovative strategies, counteracting the constraints of poverty and language barriers, and creating safe spaces where open

and respectful dialogue, largely free of prejudice, can flourish. We are convinced that such efforts are essential for understanding existing spaces, and for conceptualising and designing sustainable spatial constellations for the future.

As a next step, the Forum is to encourage and facilitate a joint process of co-producing and integrating knowledge from research, policy, planning, development and implementation practice. The focus will be on transferring knowledge about implementing intersectional gender perspectives on spatial planning and development. This approach will foster the development of solutions that consider different needs and requirements, including through the explicit negotiation of conflicting goals, thus supporting socio-spatial and socio-ecological just transformations.

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