

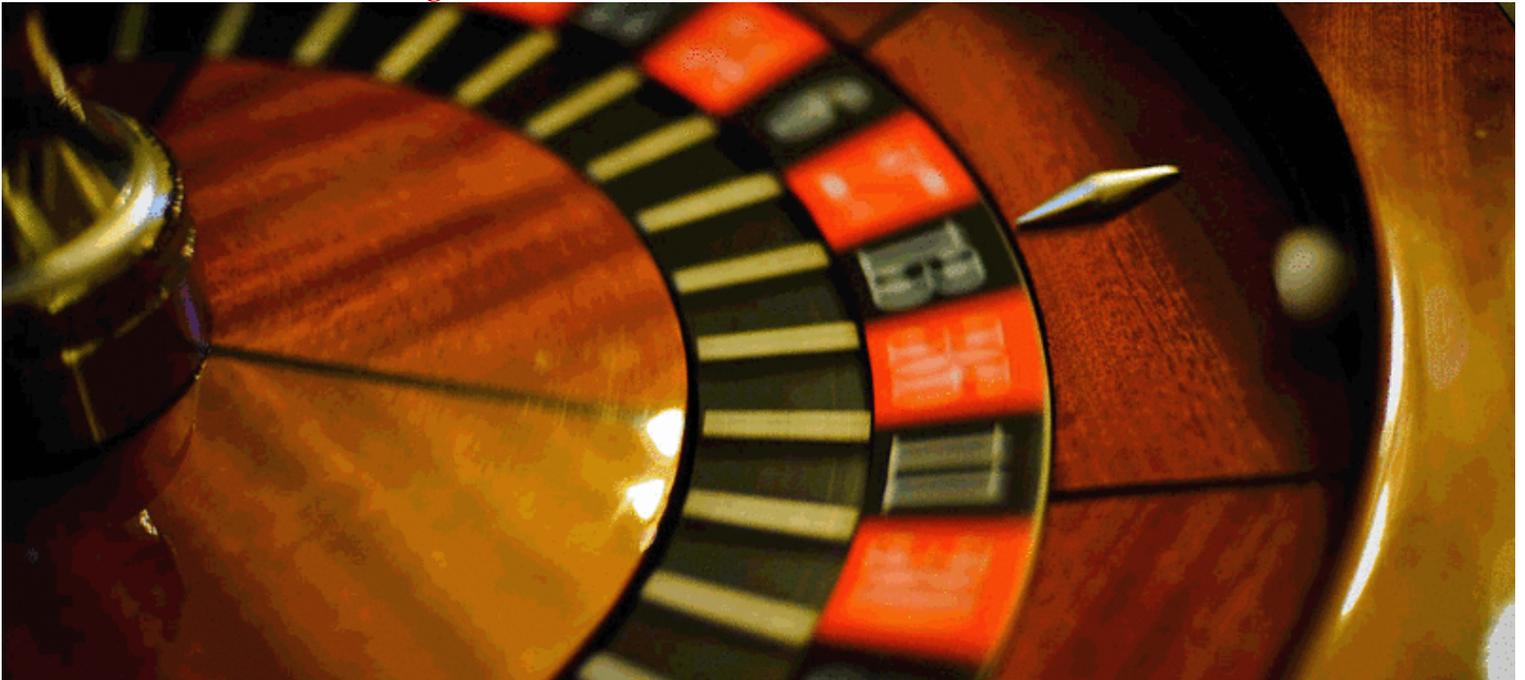


## **Katie Rose Guest Pryal**

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# The Trouble With the 'No-Matter-What Rule'

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***Image:** Wheel of Fortune, by Conor Ogle*

This conversation by *Vitae* columnists [Kelly J. Baker](#) and [Katie Rose Guest Pryal](#) is in response to [The No-Matter-What Rule of Academic Motherhood](#) by Miglena Sternadori that appeared on *Vitae* earlier this month.

**Kelly:** Katie and I are having this conversation about academic motherhood while our four children are hopefully sleeping soundly, at least my two are (though my sick kitty is huddled

over my lap).

**Katie:** I know for a fact that my two children are not sleeping soundly. I can hear them from here. They are fighting over Legos.

**Kelly:** Dude, sorry.

**Katie:** We came together to have this conversation because it elicited some strong reactions in us—both academic mothers and both well-versed in the research surrounding success, gender, parenthood, and higher ed. Sternadori's piece seems, on the one hand, like a great call-to-arms. But then, when we read more closely, we realized that this was actually a contradictory call for bootstrapping to bypass a broken system. That's not inspirational. That's dangerous.

**Kelly:** The piece begins with a generational narrative about the author's own academic parents (who were researchers at the [Bulgarian Academy of Sciences](#)). However, Sternadori quickly lasers in on her mother, whom Sternadori observes, was “never getting ahead.” She “never finished her book.” And, “in spite of the copious time [her] mother had for research, she never advanced up the ranks.” So although Sternadori says that she doesn't think her mother was a failure, her actual description of her mother belies her own words.

**Katie:** Totally. In fact, she gives her mother some postmortem academic advice: “[I]n those dark ages before online access to full text, [her mother] *should* have been spending days and nights at the library” (emphasis mine). Sternadori says her mother “never got into the habit of committing to her work.” And, according to Sternadori, that lack of commitment is the reason for her mother's lack of academic success. It seems like her mom did a good job raising Sternadori. There's at least one success. Kelly, based on what Sternadori tells us in this narrative, do you think that her mother was a failure?

**Kelly:** NO, I DON'T! Motherhood can't be boiled down to simple success or failure. Despite my vehement reaction, I tend to avoid judging other people's parenting styles because that's a dangerous road, friends. What's striking to me about her mother's story is that it actually proves how hard it is to win in this academic system—whether you have children or not, whether you are a woman or not. Her mother wasn't a failure because you can't fail when you are operating in a rigged system. It is hard for anyone to write a book. It is hard for anyone to get tenure, especially these days. It is doubly hard to do either when facing gender bias, subtle or obvious. Even though Sternadori recognizes that her mother faced “subtle gender biases,”

she still blames her mother for not spending enough time in the library. In fact, the narrative of academic success mirrors the narrative of successful motherhood in our culture, so that everything is defined by dichotomy of success or failure. Unfortunately, there is no middle ground in these discussions, and both are predicated on notions of great sacrifice for either your work or your children.

**Katie:** My main beef with this piece is how bootstrappy it is. Even though she cited a [study](#) that shows how much harder it is for mothers to be successful in academia compared to fathers, she then proceeds to say that *anyone* can beat those odds—anyone can literally disprove the study—“if you are willing to pay the price.” Her solution is not “magic,” she says. It’s just hard work! But the problem is that research documents the reverse of what she is claiming: Even though women are working as hard or harder than men, they still are not “getting ahead.” The data is not hard to find. [Vitae has covered this in depth.](#)

**Kelly:** Mothers can sacrifice everything—dance recitals, soccer games, bedtime stories, trick-or-treating, you name it—and still lose. Mothers can also succeed (shocker!) without sacrificing anything, too. It’s called “luck.” Sometimes it’s called “nepotism.” This unpredictability is key because there’s a recent study that shows that women [have to work harder](#) than men to get tenure. Mothers are in a crapshoot in which the stakes for us are very high. [Studies prove that fathers aren’t in that crapshoot](#) (they get a baby bonus, in fact). Part of the problem is cultural assumptions about motherhood, women, and competency that men simply don’t face.

**Katie:** You can tell that the author is nervous about this competency issue, especially when she talks about the Family and Medical Leave Act. She gives three reasons for not taking a leave when she had her baby while an assistant professor. The first was that “there was nobody to cover my classes and I didn’t want to let my students down.” She reiterates that point later in the same passage when she writes, “Having the option to use [FMLA] ... is not the same as knowing for sure that someone will teach your classes.” So, either she thinks she’s the only person in the entire University of South Dakota that could possibly teach her course for the weeks that she’s out (and she doesn’t have to take all 12 weeks, by the way), which makes it seem like she doesn’t trust her colleagues, or she is worried about others’ ability to appropriately staff her courses, which seems micromanager-y. Neither one of those is a good reason to avoid post-partum leave. But, Kelly, those aren’t even the only reasons she gives.

**Kelly:** Yeah, I'm struck by some of the author's language—phrases like not wanting to be an “academic lightweight who leans back” and worrying that “nobody would see you as lazy.” She invokes Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, a book and concept, which is dangerous because it puts the onus on women to either succeed or fail. *Lean In* ideology ignores the structural constraints that impact our lives. Leaning back is not the problem. Moreover, I'm wondering if the author sees motherhood as a zero-sum game. Why not take a couple of weeks to recover from childbirth? Like you said, there's no requirement to take the full 12 weeks.

**Katie:** She implies that academic mothers don't work hard enough—not like she does. No wonder she “greatly annoys people around [her].” She's essentially saying that if academic mothers did [inappropriate bootstrappy stiff-upper-lip Churchill quote here], we would all have tenure like she does. (Forget the terrible job market. Forget the implosion of academia that we're all watching with our popcorn right now.) At least she acknowledges that she “beat the odds.” But then, in the same paragraph, she writes that anyone can beat odds if they pay the “high price.” Not only is this illogical (that's not how “odds” work), research proves that it is also false.

**Kelly:** So, sure, we could all work ourselves to exhaustion and bear the burdens of personal disappointment, and then maybe, we could have shot? (Because that's all we'd get—just a *shot*.) Not only are there presumptions about what successful academic life looks like (work, work, work, kids, work, no sleep), this “rule” also presumes an able-bodied status that is required in order to even live with this schedule. Similar to academic mothers, academics with psychiatric disabilities, for example, deal with a “[presumption of incompetence](#)” and must “work extra hard to prove that [they] can do their job.” This piece's glorification of overwork makes me realize why so many women—and others—abandon the academy. Reading this piece made me think “God, I wouldn't want this job. Why did I ever?”

**Katie:** You know what really gets me? Her “no-matter-what” rule? It's nothing new. What have you and I been doing, with our four children between us, our 20-plus years in academia? Our nearly 10 books (published and forthcoming) between us? Sitting on our tuffets? Her rule isn't a rule at all. It's just “academic motherhood” period. Full stop. I'm Habermama, Cixousie Homemaker, and Adorna Reed, and I serve my family frozen pizza (h/t to [Roopika Risam](#) for inspiring the nicknames). We—and every other mother—didn't need a rule. We have just worked, parented, worked, parented, ad infinitum. That's just called life.

**Kelly:** Rinse and repeat. But, the difference is you and I have fun, not just “limited fun.” I don’t do a lot of “bar hopping.” (Do people with children even use this term?) Of course, I write a lot during naptime and after my kids head to bed (like, you know, right now). I pay for preschool for my kids so that I can get work done. My son didn’t sleep through the night until recently, so I worked a lot while I was tired. The point is the “no-matter-what rule” is not unique; it’s what we often have to live with. There are choices that mothers (and parents) make. I choose to have more fun. I choose not to work myself to exhaustion. I choose quality time with my children. Those choices have consequences, but I still make them.

**Katie:** Right, Kelly. These are compromises that I make every damn day. The problem with the article, then, is this: She’s suggesting that if you follow her rules, then you will (likely) have her success. And that’s a lie. Her words are irresponsible because women will make choices based on her advice (because it was published in a credible venue) and then come to find that the choices were bad ones. It’s irresponsible because she is perpetuating a lie that has been disproven so many times over by real data.

**Kelly:** And then she makes it worse because she tells women to stop complaining. She writes, “Is it unfair for academic mothers to have to work so hard? Yes.” And I agree it is terribly unfair, but what follows is where Sternadori loses me (again). She suggests that is not “worth wasting the time to complain.” Here, I beg to differ. Complaining can be useful as a method of changing the world. As *Al Jazeera* and *Vitae* columnist [Sarah Kendzior notes](#):

*When you listen to someone complaining, you are forced to acknowledge them as a human being instead of a category. You are forced to witness how social systems are borne out in personal experience, to recognise that hardship hurts, that solutions are not as simple as they seem.*

There are no easy solutions to the academic culture of overwork and the challenges facing academic mothers. To tell us that we should simply sacrifice more and work harder does nothing to improve our situations or the structural problems of the academy, despite her nod toward wishing for structural change in her penultimate sentence. I agree with you, Katie, this is irresponsible.

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