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# Call to Action: a History of Nurse Activism in the Netherlands

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**Abstract**

Literature on nurse protests in the Netherlands is usually focused on the Witte Woede, a series of protests during the period 1989–1991. It is framed as a one-off, stand-alone event. Outside of these events, nurse protests and nursing activism are mostly invisible. This research calls for more diverse perspectives on nurse protests. Using objects and photographs from nursing history collections, we explore the under-researched history of nurse protests in the Netherlands. We analyse the media portrayal of earlier nurse protests to clarify why we do not remember them today. The objects analysed illustrate how nurses have at times positioned themselves as agents of change when their patients or profession needed it. We argue that such objects can be used to further debunk stereotypes of the apolitical, non-activist nurse.

Keywords: 20th Century, Activism, Image, Material Culture, Media, Nurse Protests

## 1 Introduction

At first glance, the simple, small, pink button is just one of many items of memorabilia that we hold in the museum collection of the Florence Nightingale Institute (FNI).[1] It is, in fact, a memento from a protest held decades ago. The Dutch slogan reads "I protest, for more.....!", obviously indicating a demand for an increase in salary. The abbreviation VVIO stands for *Nurses in Revolt*, the protest movement that organised the protest and made this button. The button further displays a bedpan held by a clenched fist: a nurse in protest. The bedpan displayed on the button symbolises the "dirty and simple" aspect of nursing work. This button in particular reflects a playful and humorous take on the image of nursing, while at the same time sending a clear message. By wearing buttons such as this, nurses and allies could identify themselves with the protest movements. The proceeds from the sale of the buttons helped fund further protests.[2]


Figure 1: Connecting old stereotypes with an activist image. Source: FNI Collection.

The protest, or rather series of protests, at which this button was worn took place between 1988 and 1991. They are referred to as *Witte Woede,* a term that originated during similar pro-

[1] The FNI is the Dutch museum for the history of nursing and boasts a unique collection of nursing objects and a nursing history archive. Since 2020, the museum has been part of the Dutch Nurse Association (V&VN).

[2] Van Vugt/Van Erp 2016, p. 25.


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tests in Belgium the year before. The name literally translates as "white anger", in reference to the colour of nurses' uniforms.[3] Nurse Gaby Breuer had set off the protests with a tiny advertisement in a national newspaper: "Police officers earn little, nurses earn even less. It is time for action!"[4] In often playful and sometimes fierce protests, nurses demanded better working conditions, improved salary and more professional autonomy.[5]

According to various media accounts of the history of Dutch nursing, these protests were unprecedented. Never before had Dutch nurses responded en masse to calls for protest.[6] Even though the protesting nurses had succeeded in mobilising support from politicians and the general public, the immediate outcomes were only moderately successful: a modest salary increase and rather vague promises of greater professional autonomy for nurses, without any concrete plans to carry them out.[7] Until today, these series of protests are seen as a major exception to the rule: nurses are generally viewed by the general public as apolitical and not as activists by nature. Thirty years later, the revolt is widely mythologised by nurses and within nursing histories as a stand-alone event. The Canon Verpleegkunde (Dutch Canon for Nursing) for example, even highlights it as the only significant protest event in nursing history.[8] Research on the tumultuous run-up to these massive revolts has, however, been missing until now.

In this article, we call for more attention to nurse activism. A search through the museum and archival collection of the FNI showed us that nurses protested many times, especially from the 1970s onward, when Dutch society was marked by activist and protest movements.[9] Still, these lesser-known protests in the run-up to the *Witte Woede* have gained hardly any attention from historians. It remains a blind spot in the historiography of nursing in the Netherlands. Through an analysis of six lesser-known objects and photographs from historical nursing collections, we show nurses' involvement in the political arena from the early 1900s up until the *Witte Woede*. We argue that such historical political work and activism in the service of the nursing profession and patient care should also be seen as aspects of nursing work and consequently included in future nursing education programmes.

## 2 Hidden Histories of Nurse Activism

We believe that one of the reasons why this part of Dutch nursing history remains underresearched lies in the dominant portrayals of nurses and nursing work, for example by the media. Historical research shows that nurses are all too often portrayed through gendered and subservient stereotypes, as doctors' handmaidens or sex objects, and their work is shown as being dirty and simple.[10] When examining international historiography more closely, however, a different image of nurses arises. D'Antonio et al. for example argued that nurses have

3 In this article we will refer to this series of protests as the Dutch nurse revolt.
4 Translation: "Agenten verdienen weinig, verpleegkundigen nog minder. De tijd is rijp voor actie". Breuer 1988.
5 Van Vugt/Van Erp 2016, p. 17.
6 See for example: www.canonverpleegkunde.nl or Van Vugt/Van Erp 2016.
7 Van Vugt/Van Erp 2016, pp. 185–186.
8 https://www.canonverpleegkunde.nl/canon/verpleegkundigen-in-opstand-1989/.
9 Duivesteijn-Ockeloen/Furnée 2016, pp. 16–19.
10 Hallam 2000, p. 15.


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historically been agents of change. Throughout their history, nurses have taken part (successfully) in political action. In most histories however, this side of nursing is usually rendered invisible.[11]

Other researchers, such as historians Kylie M. Smith and Karen Flynn, state the importance of challenging dominant narratives of nurses as powerless victims. Flynn highlighted nurses' advocacy in her case study on sickle cell activism and stated that such examples of political work should also be recognised as nursing work and included as such in the nursing curricula.[12] Smith stressed that, as well as recognising nurses' status as agents of change, we must not overlook nurses' roles in actively establishing and maintaining systems of inequality, stating that we must face history to build a better future for nursing.[13]

To better uncover these histories of activism, we highlight objects from the museum collection of the FNI. This collection is rich in photographs dating from the late 19th century to the early 2000s, most of which have been digitised and recorded. However, there were very few photographs of activism in the digitised section of the collection. In most cases, contextual information was missing. Our methods of investigating this material loosely mirrored the Panofsky method: we first described exactly what we saw, then we tried to uncover the geographical and historical context of the picture. Using contemporary sources, we then revealed the aims of the photographed protests as they were perceived by Dutch media. Finally, we connected our findings to historical literature on nursing and media histories to gain a deeper understanding of the results of our research.[14]

## 3 Nosokómos: Early Activist Protectors of the Profession?

Activist nurses had united in the professional organisation Nosokómos as far back as 1900.[15] The organisation's aim was the emancipation of the nursing profession. Its board boasted well-known Dutch feminists such as nurse Jeanne van Landschot-Hubrecht and the first Dutch female doctor, Aletta Jacobs.[16] Their small, silver-coloured insignia reads, from the inside to the outside, "*Nurses of Nosokómos Federation*". The insignia was awarded sometime between 1900 and 1921 and was gifted in 2018 to the Dutch Foundation for Nursing History (SHVB).[17] It was one of the many different insignias awarded after completing some form of nurse training, before these courses were regulated by law in 1921. The significance of this object does not lie in its lasting impact on nurse training – only a handful of nurses had completed the training by the time it was abolished. It does, however, symbolise an attempt at greater professional autonomy for nurses through education.

11 D'Antonio et al. 2010, pp. 207, 210–211.
12 Flynn 2017, p. 102.
13 Smith 2020, p. 1429.
14 Panofsky 1972.
15 Translated full name: Nosokómos, the Dutch Organization for the Advocacy of Nurses. Nosokómos is the Ancient Greek word for "nurse".
16 Wiegman 1993, pp. 111–112.
17 Full name: Stichting Historisch Verpleegkundig Bezit: verpleegkundigerfgoed.nl.


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Figure 2: Nosokómos insignia. Source: Dutch Foundation of Nursing History (SHVB).

Nosokómos saw the nurse training system as a major obstacle to an autonomous and powerful nursing profession. At the time, nurses were trained by the care institutions themselves. Standardised nurse training and examinations did not exist. Doctors and hospital directors held considerable influence over what nurses were and were not taught. Rather than being full-time students, nurse trainees often acted as full-time employees. They bore the brunt of the practical nursing work and got paid little in return. After completing their training, graduates were usually replaced with a new class of nurse trainees, as graduate nurses were deemed too expensive. The system limited the cost of nursing labour, so matrons and hospital directors were unwilling to change it.[18] Nosokómos accused the biggest nursing organisation, the Dutch Federation for Nurses,[19] of being run by doctors, directors and "lady nurses" and of failing to serve the needs of nurses at the bedside.[20]

In the course of its short existence, Nosokómos continuously strove to achieve a stricter, more uniform nursing education. It did so by advocating for state involvement in nursing education and by organising its own training courses and examinations. These were stricter and much more difficult than those of the Dutch Federation for Nurses. Because of the fierce competition with the much bigger and much more powerful federation, Nosokómos' training programme never gained much traction among nurses and employers.[21] In 1921, nursing examinations were standardised by the Dutch government. However, the government did not follow the radical reforms suggested by Nosokómos. Nursing education would still be greatly affected by the pragmatic needs of doctors and employers.[22] Non-official training courses, including those offered by Nosokómos, were discontinued. This insignia therefore symbolises an early, but failed, struggle by nurses for professional autonomy.

18 Wiegman 1993, pp. 309–311; Bakker-Van der Kooij 1983, pp. 470–473.
19 Nederlandsche Bond voor Ziekenverpleging.
20 Wiegman 1993, pp. 307–308.
21 Bakker-Van der Kooij 1982, pp. 205–207.
22 Van der Peet 2021, p. 25.


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## 4 The Return of the Protesting Nurse: 1970s and 1980s

The following photograph features people marching through the Dutch city of Rotterdam. They are wearing everyday clothes and holding signs with Dutch phrases asking the government to take action to improve healthcare. Several of the signs include a rhyming slogan such as "Funding guns, not medical resources."[23] Another sign poses the question "Who is the guarantor of our health?"[24] It is clear from these signs that the protesters are addressing the government. In total, six hundred district nurses, general practitioners and other healthcare workers protested for more funding for Rotterdam's "old suburbs", the pre-World War II suburbs in which healthcare was much less organised than the city's newer suburbs. While the latter were provided with local health centres, the former often had none.

The district nurses argued that they had trouble working together as they had no place to meet. Other necessities, such as pharmacies, were scarce in the old suburbs. Residents sometimes had to travel over five kilometres to reach one. According to the protesters, too much funding was directed towards hospital care. This resulted in a shortage of personnel among district nurses. In the Dutch newspaper *Het Vrije Volk*, Marijke Schreurs, a district nurse, said: "The healthcare system is ill; as of now we can only fight the symptoms. Providing proper help is impossible."[25] This photograph is a powerful example of how nurses stand up not only for themselves, but also for their patients.


Figure 3: Nurses, general practitioners, social workers and pharmacy employees demanding improved healthcare in the "old suburbs" of large cities in the Netherlands during a protest in Rotterdam, September 8th 1973. Source: FNI Collection. Photograph by Jan Stöpetie.

[23] Dutch: "Poen naar kanonnen, niet medische bronnen."
[24] Dutch: "Wie staat borg voor onze gezondheid?"
[25] Het Vrije Volk 1973, p. 7.


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## 5 Creativity in Nurse Protests: Black Books

The divide between the different groups of protesters in Rotterdam was considerable. They were unable to set aside their different views on improvements within healthcare. But one thing they did do was publish a black book, which was a common feature of nurse protests in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s.[26]

The fourth object, or rather, series of objects, on nursing activism that we highlight is therefore the black book. This is a compiled collection of personal complaints and serves as a statement to both the public and the authorities. Many of these personal complaints revolve around distressing circumstances that have occurred due to the nurse being unable to give the patient the necessary care, often because of a lack of time and resources. A black book therefore provides a unique insight into nurses' views of healthcare at the time they were produced. Nurses and nurse advocacy groups often published these books around the time that nurse protests were taking place. Sometimes the public was able to buy them during the protests.[27] To educate other nurses about their cause, advocacy groups encouraged health institutions to buy the book for their nursing staff. The black book can therefore be seen as an object which was not only used as evidence of distressing circumstances in nursing care, but also as a vehicle for change.


Figure 4: Several black books from the 1970s and 1980s. Source: FNI Collection.

Much of the original contents are forgotten over time, but the tradition of black books has not ended; they are still produced today.[28] Another example of this lasting tradition is the work of a former nurse educator, who also produced one of the black books in the 1980s. Rather than publishing a new black book, he chose to highlight optimistic messages from people within the profession. His *white book* consists of personal contributions from 1,162 nurses, which together build a narrative for a more positive image of the nursing profession.[29]

[26] De Tijd 1973, p. 3.
[27] For example at the 1973 nurse protest in Rotterdam, see: De Tijd 1973, p. 3.
[28] For example in 2012 a black book was created by nurses at the Akkerwinde nursing home and given to the local authorities, see: https://www.nursing.nl/zwartboek-clienten-in-ontlasting-zieke-collegas-niet-vervangen-tvvnew102883w/.
[29] Eliëns 2022, p. 5.


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## 6 Nurse Protest Songs

Black books were not the only creative way in which nurses made their voices known. In the fashion of famous protest songs of the 1960s and 1970s, nurses and nurse advocacy groups also wrote their own protest songs, which they performed during protests. We found a number of these songs in the FNI's archival collection. Exact dates as to when these songs were created and where they were performed were, however, often unknown. But through research, we were able to reconstruct one of these nurse protest performances.


Figure 5: Nurses singing a protest song during a national protest in Utrecht, May 10th 1980. Source: FNI Collection, courtesy of NFP Utrecht.

Two days before International Nurses Day, on May 10th 1980, a union and a nurse protest group organised a protest in the city of Utrecht to demand increased staffing standards in care institutions. It was a national protest involving many Dutch nurse advocacy groups and representatives of the ministries of health and social affairs, and it revolved not only around the nurses themselves, but also around their patients. The aim was to increase funding by both the government and insurance providers, without increasing the insurance excess.[30] While fighting for a serious cause, the day was also filled with cultural activities, such as cabaret and music.[31]

A number of nurses had written a protest song (figure 5), based on the chorus and melody of the 1979 Dutch up-tempo pop hit "Opzij" by Herman van Veen. Van Veen's lyrics criticise the rush of daily life and are sung with much urgency. "We truly want to work hard, but we cannot go on like this for years" are just some of the lyrics that describe this urgency for change in the nurses' version of this song. It must be noted that we are not entirely certain whether this exact song was being performed in the photograph above (figure 5), but we do know that this song was performed at either this protest or a protest a year earlier, which was organised by the same nurse protest group. This makes it likely that they might have sung this song at the 1980 protest.

30 Hoekstra 1980, p. 5.
31 De Waarheid 1980, p. 7.


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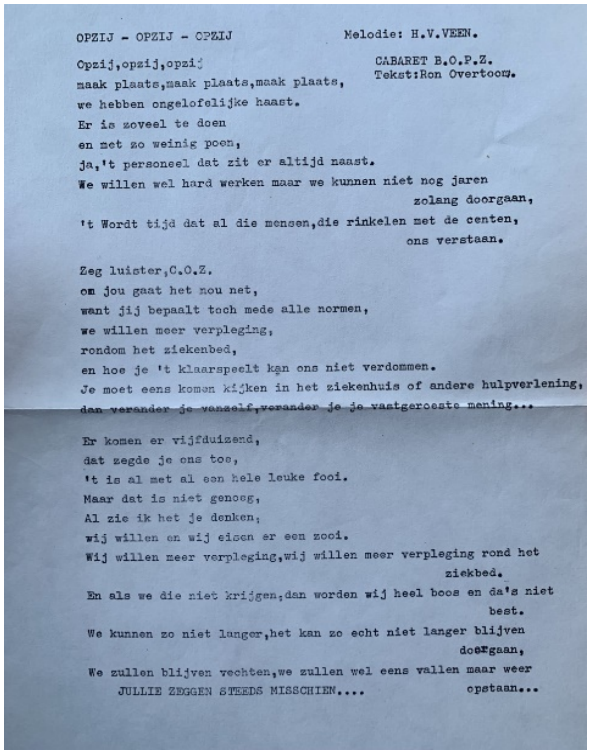
In figure 5, the banner in the background addresses the need for more personnel and argues that the government is responsible for creating more jobs. It fits perfectly with the lyrics sheet (figure 6), which also addresses the responsibility of the government. Ultimately, these objects are another example of the many creative ways nurses let their voices be heard.



OPZIJ - OPZIJ - OPZIJ Melodie: H.V.VEEN.

Opzij,opzij,opzij CABARET B.O.P.Z.
maak plaats,maak plaats,maak plaats, Tekst:Ron Overtoom.
we hebben ongelofelijke haast.
Er is zoveel te doen
en met zo weinig poen,
ja,'t personeel dat zit er altijd naast.
We willen wel hard werken maar we kunnen niet nog jaren
zolang doorgaan,
't Wordt tijd dat al die mensen,die rinkelen met de centen,
ons verstaan.

Zeg luister,C.O.Z.
om jou gaat het nou net,
want jij bepaalt toch mede alle normen,
we willen meer verpleging,
rondom het ziekenbed,
en hoe je 't klaarspeelt kan ons niet verdommen.
Je moet eens komen kijken in het ziekenhuis of andere hulpverlening,
dan verander je vanzelf,verander je je vastgeroeste mening...

Er komen er vijfduizend,
dat zegde je ons toe,
't is al met al een hele leuke fooi.
Maar dat is niet genoeg,
Al zie ik het je denken;
wij willen en wij eisen er een zooi.
Wij willen meer verpleging,wij willen meer verpleging rond het
ziekbed.
En als we die niet krijgen,dan worden wij heel boos en da's niet
best.
We kunnen zo niet langer,het kan zo echt niet langer blijven
doorgaan,
We zullen blijven vechten,we zullen wel eens vallen maar weer
JULLIE ZEGGEN STEEDS MISSCHIEN.... opstaan...

Figure 6: Lyric sheet of a nurse protest song performed during a national protest in either 1979 or 1980. Source: FNI Collection.

## 7 Researching the "Lost" Photographs

We found the photograph in figure 5 with no indication of subject, location or date. As most photographs featured nurses holding signs and protesting on streets, this is where we started our research. We closely examined each photograph, paying particular attention to what was written on the signs. Through this, we tried to determine which organisation was behind the protests. By carefully scrutinising any clues that might reveal the photographs' geographical location, such as store signs or, in one lucky case, a familiar hospital, we were also able to answer an even more basic question: which photographs belonged together?

After we had organised the groups of photographs, we used digital databases of city archives and Google Maps to determine the location of each photograph. Photographs on which geographical signs were absent, such as in figure 5, could be located by identifying familiar individuals found on other photographs in the same series. This proved to be an effective method, since we soon located protests in the cities of Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Utrecht. We could then browse newspaper and magazine databases such as *Delpher* to find articles describing the events that took place. This sometimes helped us pinpoint the location of the photographs taken and provided us with more context of the protests depicted.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Although we found many short articles on the subject, nurse protests in the 1970s and 1980s never seem to have featured on the front pages of Dutch newspapers. What caused journalists to *not* write about these events? And what had motivated nurses to protest, besides their desire to improve the well-being of both themselves and their patients? The answers lie in societal and media developments, as explained in the next section.

## 8 Context: a Rebellious Society?

When it comes to societal developments, there are two important trends throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The first trend is that Dutch society in general was increasingly questioning traditional authority structures, such as the church and the state. This growing scepticism caused an increase in the number of protests during the 1970s.[32] Second-wave feminism had also emerged in the Netherlands. From the 1960s onwards, feminist movements demanded more freedom and greater equality in what work women could do.[33] In line with this movement, the nursing profession in the Netherlands achieved greater emancipation throughout the 1970s. An example of this was a new law that officially changed the name from "sick nurse" or *ziekenverpleegster* to "nurse" or *Verpleegkundige*. The new term was deemed more suited to the growing complexity of the profession, as *verpleegster* had a belittling and derogative undertone. The new term also included male nurses.[34] It seems plausible that these developments were examples of a more emancipated and vocal nursing profession.

The second trend is a shift towards post-material values. Social welfare, and prosperity in general, had improved enormously after World War II. This brought about a greater focus on quality of life and well-being. Because of the increased social welfare and growing scepticism, new social and political agendas were greeted with much enthusiasm.[35] These broader societal developments influenced the nurse protests of the 1970s and 1980s.

## 9 Media Developments

According to media historian Huub Wijfjes, Dutch journalists were not representative of Dutch society throughout the 1970s when it comes to political alignment. While society was mostly aligned to the political centre, with about a third voting for Christian democratic parties, most journalists leaned towards the left or even radical left.[36] During the 1960s, a critical culture had emerged among these journalists – a culture against authority. Criticism of and resistance to the established, the conventional and the self-evident was a central attitude among many Dutch newspapers throughout the 1970s. *Het Vrije Volk* and *De Volkskrant* were some of these critical newspapers used for our research. Whereas their journalists had previously worked *with* the authorities, they were now geared towards debunking them, striving to reveal an "ugly truth".[37] Combine this with the shift towards well-being as an important subject within society and it seems remarkable that there were no largescale reports of the nurse protests.

[32] Kennedy 2017, pp. 353–356.
[33] Kennedy 2017, p. 353.
[34] Van der Peet 2021, pp. 135–137.
[35] Kennedy 2017, p. 354.
[36] Wijfjes 2005, p. 363.
[37] Wijfjes 2005, pp. 340–341.


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Research shows that certain developments within the film industry had a major impact on nurses' public image. The Hays Code, a system of censorship that had been imposed on Hollywood studios for over three decades, was replaced in 1968. This caused a re-emergence of sexualisation of female characters, including nurses, in popular film.[38] Another study of films that feature nurses as a main role showed that, between the 1960s and 1980s, the portrayal of nurses as sex objects was a major trend.[39] This perhaps influenced the public image of the nurse as someone not to be taken seriously, or at least not as seriously as other, more radical protesters. Moreover, Dutch news media during this period were predominately staffed with male journalists. An example of the editor-in-chief of a major newspaper publicly stating that he did not want to add female journalists to his all-male staff, demonstrates the sometimes misogynistic attitude of the Dutch media at that time.[40] This offers one explanation as to why nurse protests do not feature prominently in Dutch newspapers.

## 10 Back to the *Witte Woede*

We started this article with a protest button worn during *Witte Woede*, a series of protests that lasted from 1988 to 1991, in which nurses demanded better working conditions, higher salaries and more professional autonomy. The nurses of VVIO felt frustrated that nurses had no say in healthcare policy making. According to them, the existing unions and professional organisations were doing little to change the situation. One of the reasons for this was the prevailing image of nursing work, which was seen as dirty but simple, or, as one organiser stated: not as something for which one needs "to work hard *and* know much."[41]

Through mass protests, VVIO wanted to break with the stubborn image of the sweet but subservient nurse. They wanted to show the general public and politicians a different side of nurses: that of an autonomous professional group that demanded to be treated as such.[42] The button described in the introduction to this article carries exactly this message. One of the leading nurses from VVIO would recall the actions as a radical attempt to change the stereotypical image of nursing work as simple and dirty and that of nurses as not willing to take action: "We did not just complain but we did something about it. We took action to change our situation ourselves."[43]

Through this message, VVIO was successful in mass-mobilising the media, politicians and nurses alike. Not only did these actions capture the attention of major national newspapers, but the Dutch Broadcasting Foundation (NOS) also covered the protests almost daily.[44] The widespread media attention in turn bolstered the ranks of the protesters, which grew in size significantly. In nursing's collective memory, this series of protests has until now marked the beginning and endpoint of nurse activism. At the time of Gaby Breuer's call, unionists and nurse advocacy groups still shared the common view that nurses were politically unmotivated

38 Hallam 2000, pp. 70–71.
39 Stanley 2008, pp. 89–91.
40 Wijfjes 2005, pp. 364–366.
41 Lammers/Goudriaan 1989, p. 381.
42 Lammers/Goudriaan 1989, pp. 379–381.
43 Jonkers 2011, p. 17.
44 De Graaf 1990, pp. 443–444.


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and unwilling to protest.[45] Rather than a stand-alone "bombshell", we argue that the *Witte Woede* was a strong example of a profession that was growing to be more politically aware after a 50-year period of relative silence.

## 11 Conclusion

Through the analysis of six objects, just a few of the examples of nurse activism present in the museum collection, we have shown that such objects can provide us with valuable knowledge concerning nurse activism. They illustrate how groups of nurses have at times positioned themselves as political agents of change when their patients or profession needed it. These objects are a valuable addition to the existing Dutch histories of nursing. Not only do they show a broader activist side to the profession than is usually remembered, but they can also help debunk other ingrained stereotypes of the apolitical nurse.

By contextualising the protests, for instance by connecting them to societal and media developments, we clarify why earlier protests have generally been forgotten. Even though the nursing profession became more emancipated and vocal from the 1970s onward, the image of the nurse was, at the same time, becoming more sexualised through popular film. Moreover, even though Dutch journalism had developed more of an anti-establishment attitude during this time, it still mainly consisted of male journalists who did not take women as seriously as men. We also suspect that the ingrained stereotype of the subservient nurse strengthened journalists' neglect of nurses' issues, as the image of nurses did not reflect their anti-establishment attitude. However, the *Witte Woede* protests of the late 1980s and early 1990s did gain significantly more media attention and mobilised more nurses than the previous protests. We suspect that this has led to these protests going down in history as a stand-alone event. Although it was the largest in size, we show that the *Witte Woede* is not the only example of Dutch nurse activism in history.

We suggest that more research is needed on this subject to broaden our understanding of nurse activism and political nursing work in the Netherlands. For example: what was the actual scope of all these nurse protests in the Netherlands before the *Witte Woede*? In what way did these protests change how nurses viewed themselves, or how nurses were viewed by society? What examples of nurse activism can be found in the period between Nosokómos and the 1970s and 1980s? Perhaps it is not possible to answer these big questions, but we believe that by starting small we might be able to answer them over time, for example by studying the contents of the black books and enriching them with oral history research.

The objects and photographs from this limited study show that nurses have a long history of standing up for their profession and their patients, despite their actions being at times invisible in nursing histories. For us, this research proved to be a great opportunity to test methods of dating and locating photographs from the FNI archive. By connecting them to other activist objects, these objects truly became "lost and found.

[45] Van Vugt/Van Erp 2016, p. 19.


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