



In conferring the PAFIOO Banaag Award upon Zita T. Cabais, the President recognizes her resilience and significant contributions in championing the rights of Filipino domestic workers and in fighting labor exploitation and human trafficking that have driven awareness for stronger policies towards decent work in France and across Europe.



Zita T. Cabais

France

Hometown: Bani, Pangasinan

In the face of human trafficking, labor exploitation, and modern-day slavery, some voices rise to fight back. One such voice belongs to Zita T. Cabais, a former Filipino domestic worker turned union leader, whose life has become a powerful testament to resilience, advocacy, and the relentless pursuit of justice. From her humble beginnings in the Philippines to her emergence as a respected defender of workers' rights in France, her journey is nothing short of extraordinary.

From Hardship to Hope

Zita's early life was marked by hardship. Growing up in the rural town of Bani, Pangasinan, she faced the pressing responsibility of helping her family survive. After completing her elementary education, she had no choice but to start working, forgoing the chance to pursue higher education.

Her life's trajectory changed dramatically in 1994 when she migrated to France, hoping to find better opportunities. However, what awaited her was not the prosperity she envisioned. Instead, she encountered exploitation and

abuse as a domestic worker. For years, she endured harsh working conditions that left her feeling powerless. But her strength of spirit remained intact. In 2003, she won a legal battle against her abusive employer, an achievement that marked the beginning of her transformation into a fierce advocate for workers' rights.

Rising as an Advocate

The legal victory over her employer ignited a passion within Zita to help others. She joined the trade union and began raising awareness about the exploitation faced by domestic workers in France, many of whom are Filipino migrants. Her advocacy work quickly gained momentum, and she became a key figure in the fight for labor rights, with her focus on protecting the most vulnerable. She has held various influential roles in organizations where she has advocated for workers' rights and organized activities aimed at intensifying campaigns against human trafficking and labor exploitation and providing support to its victims.

Through annual campaigns and public events, Zita helped amplify the voices of those often silenced. Her

efforts brought international attention to the issues of unfair working conditions, long hours, and the lack of social protections for domestic workers, particularly migrants. She continuously advocates for the ratification by the French Government of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 189, which provides vital protections for domestic workers.

A Lifeline for the Undocumented

Beyond policy change, Zita helped over 180 undocumented Filipino workers in France secure legal work permits. As the General Secretary of the *Syndicat des Assistants Maternels & Salariés des Services à la Personne d'Ile de France* (Union of Childcare Assistants and Personal Services Employees in France) and part of the *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail* (French Democratic Confederation of Labor), she has played a crucial role in legalizing the status of Filipino workers living in fear of deportation and exploitation. Through her tireless work, these workers now have the chance to live and work in France with dignity, and their rights as legal employees are recognized and protected.

Championing Victims of Trafficking and Exploitation

Zita has been at the forefront of assisting victims of labor exploitation and human trafficking. Collaborating with organizations like the *Comité Contre L'esclavage Moderne* (Committee Against Modern Slavery), she has provided crucial support to 86 Filipino victims of labor exploitation, helping them file legal complaints against their abusive employers and guiding them through the complex process of seeking justice. She has been able to provide a comprehensive support system for victims, offering emotional and psychological support and helping them rebuild their lives after escaping exploitation.

Zita's advocacy has not been limited to courtrooms and legal proceedings. In 2023, she organized an exhibition at the Museum of the History of Immigration in France that featured the story of 4 out of 14 Filipino domestic workers and their displayed belongings, which symbolized their experiences of exploitation and human trafficking. The exhibit served as a powerful call to action, urging society to recognize the often invisible struggles of migrant workers and to push for stronger protections of their rights.

Zita is a voice not just for Filipino workers but for all migrant workers worldwide. She has shared her expertise and personal story on numerous platforms, including conferences organized by the United Nations, the ILO, and the French government. Her ability to articulate the struggles of migrant workers and her unwavering commitment to advocating for their rights have made her a respected speaker at these high-level events.

Through her advocacy, she has brought attention to the issues of human trafficking and labor exploitation on an international stage, where her voice has resonated with

policymakers, human rights activists, and labor leaders alike.

Empowering Filipino Migrants

As the Founder and President of the *Asosasyong Sanggunian Filipino*, Zita has organized a wide range of programs designed to uplift and support Filipino workers in France. From free weekly workshops that teach migrants the French language to sessions on labor laws and social protection regulations, her efforts have created safe spaces where Filipinos can share their experiences and seek the help they need.

As a member of the International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council, Zita contributed to the creation of anti-trafficking guidelines for publications across Europe. In collaboration with the Philippine Embassy in Paris, she also produced labor rights leaflets in Filipino, providing Filipino migrants with essential information about their rights as workers.

Zita's work on the ground has been equally impactful. She played a key role in developing the guide for Filipino migrants in France, with funding support from the ILO and the European Commission. These guides, written in both English and Filipino, serve as invaluable resources for Filipino migrants, offering crucial information on labor rights, social protection, and access to assistance. Through her initiative, Zita ensured that these guides were informative, culturally relevant, and accessible to the Filipino community.

A Legacy of Advocacy and Hope

Zita's story of resilience and her fight for workers' rights have been featured across various media platforms, including interviews, French newspaper publications, and international documentaries. Her work has not only raised awareness about the exploitation of domestic workers but has also helped bring the broader issues of human trafficking and labor exploitation into the public consciousness.

From a small town in Pangasinan to the forefront of labor rights advocacy in France, Zita's journey is a story of courage, strength, and transformation. Her life's work has been dedicated to fighting systemic injustices, and her advocacy has made a tangible difference in the lives of Filipino migrants and workers around the world.

From a young girl forced into labor to a formidable advocate for migrant workers' rights, Zita has turned her personal struggles into a powerful tool for change. Her work continues to inspire hope and drive the global movement for workers' rights, ensuring that the voices of the marginalized are heard and that their rights are upheld. Through her tireless efforts, Zita remains a beacon of hope, standing tall as a champion for justice and dignity in the fight against human trafficking and labor exploitation.