



## Fitness model Ninu Galot doesn't consider vitiligo as an imperfection as it adds a unique element to her beauty. By Kritika Dua

From being a contestant at America's Next Top Model to becoming the face of Diesel's un-retouched spring/summer 2015 campaign, featured in Ted Talk, along with being the covergirl for several high-profile magazines, Winnie Harlow did it all. The Canadian 23-year-old model has redefined the norms of fashion by becoming the first supermodel having vitiligo (a chronic skin condition that produces patches of pigmentation when the immune system attacks the body's melanin).

Closer home, Deepika Padukone bared her heart out about her struggle with depression while Ileana D'Cruz opened up about dealing with body dysmorphic disorder. We have come of age when celebs are voicing their opinions on body-image issues.

One such woman is a fitness model from UK, Ninu Galot who has battled with vitiligo for 15 odd years but learned to accept it as part of her identity. "I believe that everyone should embrace themselves as they are, I wouldn't call vitiligo an imperfection as what society terms as flaw is something that

makes me stand out.

"The skin patches are not a flaw as god gave me these. And now I want to voice my hardships and the process of overcoming it so as to succour other people conquer vitiligo."

Galot believes that making statements is easy but battling with the disease is not, as one has to cross various societal and personal obstacles before embracing oneself. "I have dealt with the skin pigmentation condition for a long duration. So, don't look at me and be perplexed about the fact that how I have embraced it? If I can do it, others can too, with a little help and that's the reason why I am trying to destigmatise it by creating awareness."

She didn't have trailblazers like Winnie Harlow or Deepika Padukone while growing up, someone she could look upto during challenging times, rather she took the hard way. "I tried homeopathic treatment, yoga and pranayama. I even changed my diet time and again, spent a lot of money travelling to milan for treatment – doing everything possible to tone down the effects of vitiligo. I used to hide the patches on my body by covering myself with layers of fabric. It was only when the patches started to appear on my hands that I realised I couldn't hide it anymore."

Added she, "From there began the journey of acceptance. I tried changing my mindset – attending seminars, reading books by the American motivational author Louise Hay which I came across during one of the personal development courses I underwent. Her writings changed my perception altogether – taught me how to love myself irrespective of all odds."

It was last year, while on a solo trip to Australia, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, when she decided to wear clothes that no longer hid the patches only to realise that no one really noticed the patches apart from her. This made her question the years she spent under the layers, limiting herself while shunning the outside world. "It is essential to remember that perception is relative in nature – constantly changing with how one carries themselves."

The journey of acceptance was long and taxing. People who are going through body-image issues often suffer from low self-esteem and hatred. Galot was diagnosed with vitiligo at 11, it started from having a small patch behind her neck. Then came the breakout in 2004, a challenging time for her as she always strived for perfection but this was something she did not have a control over.

Galot spoke on various platforms including BBC Radio and television channels. "I was never bullied while growing up as it was at an initial stage and could be easily covered. Later on, when I started talking about it, all I received was love and support." It was during this time that her social media account was flooded with sanguine responses from people who looked up to her as a source of strength to fight the odds and not suffer in silence. Some even called her courageous and inspirational. Galot believes that when a normal person speaks about such issues, one can feel a connection with the emotional suffering.

Galot's broad shoulders took the weight of her family business in real estate, once she had completed her Business Economics degree. However, she was yet to find her creative side. From singing, acting to dancing, she tried it all, till she stumbled upon a fitness competition. Taking it as a challenge, she was soon on her way to become a fitness model. The strenuous regime along with Hay's work made her emotionally stronger. "It not only gave me the strength to fight my inferiority but also to document my battle with Vitiligo."

But she was not alone in her battle, her family originally from Jodhpur, Rajasthan visited India often. "My parents have been my biggest mentors and support system. They witnessed the agony I went through all these years, trying to get treated and how the efforts went to drain. I used to cry being unable to gather the confidence to go out. Soon, I had made a cocoon for myself – lost in my abyss. But it was my parents along with my friends who didn't bother about society's opinion when I wore a bikini for the fitness competition or for any other reason. They continued to cheer for me when I was standing in front of a huge crowd embracing myself."

Having travelled across the globe, she strongly feels that UK is more supportive of people who suffer from Vitiligo than India. Her personal experience got credential once she started her research for the documentary. "Though people suffer from inferiority complex in both countries due to their condition, there is a wider acceptance in the West where women do not have to face marital rejection. Something that is totally unacceptable." The reason she decided to be their voice, tell them that it's normal to have skin patches and creating awareness about how it is not a contagious.